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GRAY SHOE

PERCY WEBBNER

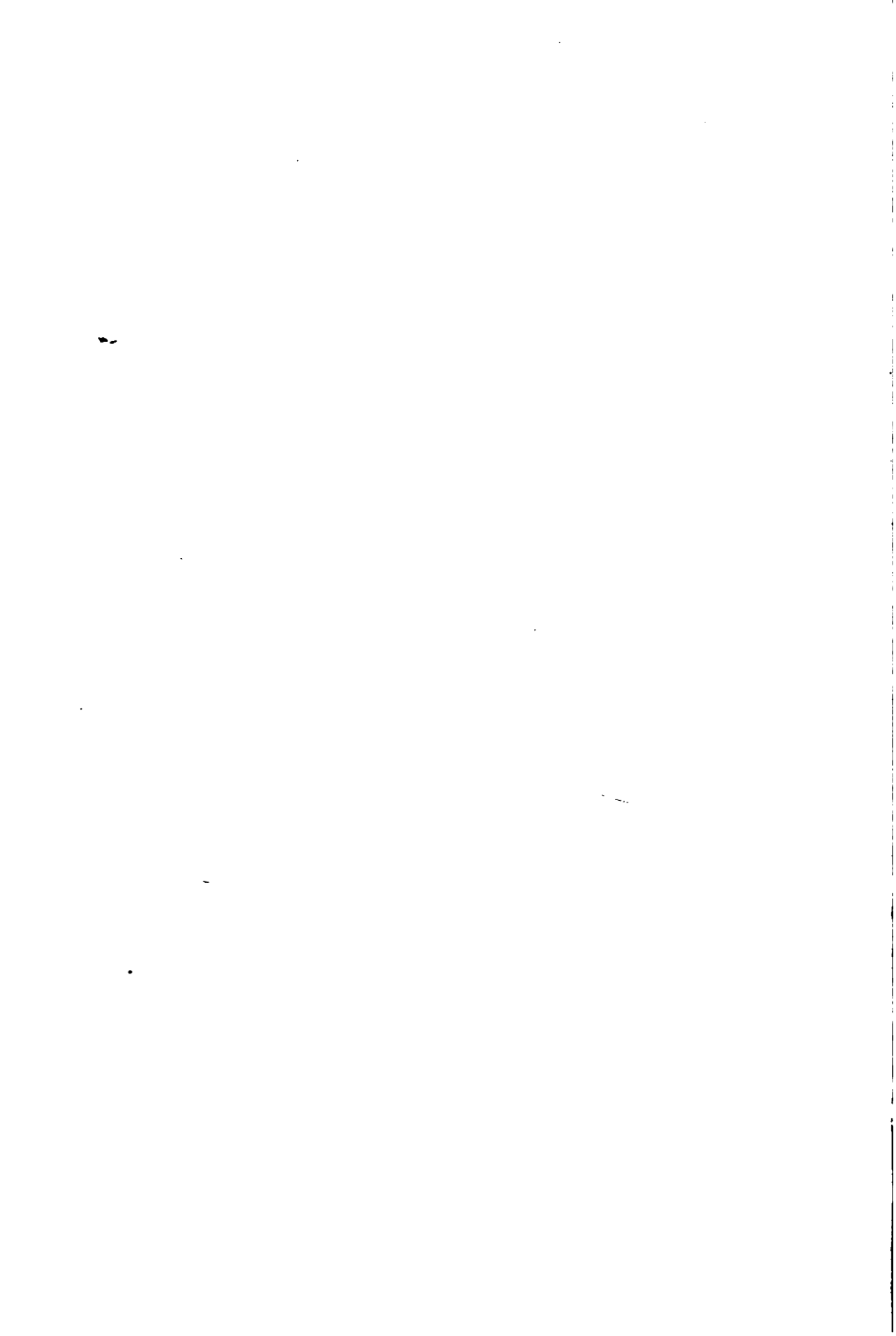




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"Here is property of yours," he said. **FRONTISPIECE.** See Page 84.

THE LITTLE GRAY SHOE

A ROMANCE

BY

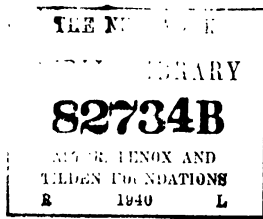
PERCY BREBNER

AUTHOR OF "PRINCESS MARITZA," "A ROYAL WARD,"
"THE BROWN MASK," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
F. VAUX WILSON

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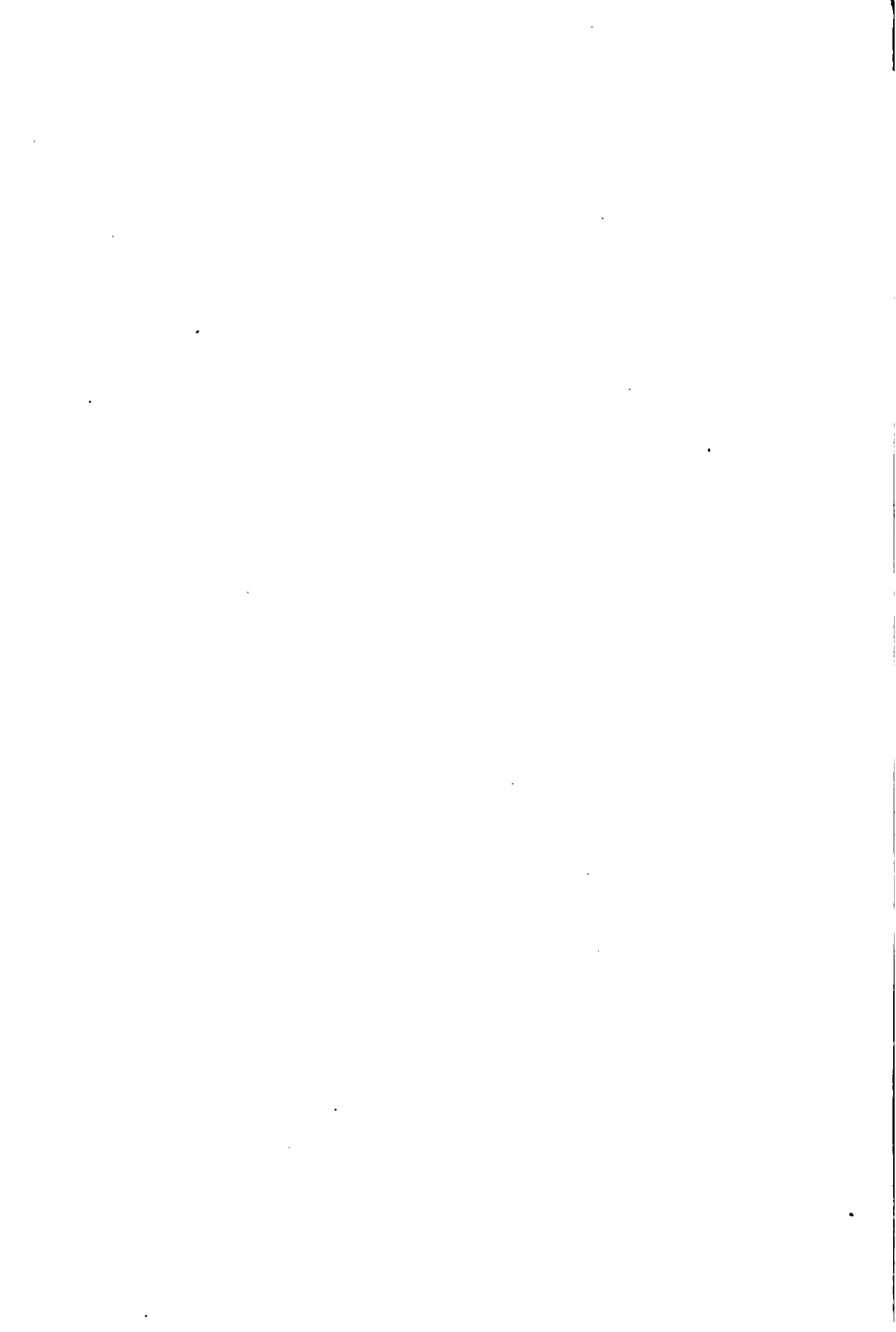
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THE LITTLE GRAY SHOE

CHAPTER I

TELLS OF THE OPENING OF A DOOR

THERE was a patch of sunlight on the threshold, coming and going as the fleecy clouds swept across the afternoon sky. It made me think of those happy little bursts of laughter which a child will give. I was conscious of it as I finished reading the letter which had been handed to me only an hour ago.

“You should certainly return at once,” the letter concluded, and by way of disagreement I muttered an oath. So far I had ordered my own affairs, taking advice of none, and if I had found strange places and come into queer company, what was that to anyone? I had asked no favours and owed no man anything. It is a fool’s game to let others guide your life for you; with the best intentions they are sure, sooner or later, to bring you into the shallows, may perchance make wreckage of you altogether. I drank the remains of the liquor in a tankard which stood on the rough table beside me, and stared out of the open door across the barrack yard.

In the covered way along the opposite wall a score or more of men were gaming and drinking, laughing or cursing as the cards or the dice fell in their favour or otherwise; while one burly fellow, whose liquor seemed to have gone to his head instead of his stomach, was straddling on a barrel set on end and roaring out a ribald ditty, first chanted, I should fancy, on a Paris boulevard. They were representative of a godless crew, these fellows, recruited from almost every capital in Europe, and their native land was probably the richer for having seen the last of them. So long as a man had the physique for the work, few questions were asked when he joined the King's Guard, and if he did that work satisfactorily, small notice was taken of anything else he might do. It was a company of broken-down gentlemen, spendthrifts, ne'er-do-wells, and criminals who had fled from justice; a company feared by every respectable citizen, and without its counterpart, I warrant, though the search began at Lisbon and ended at Petersburg. Oh, I sat in no harsh judgment on these fellows; how could I? I was of the King's Guard myself.

This letter, with its advice to return at once, raked up the ashes of a sordid story which shall not find repetition here. I had done with it although I could not obliterate the marks it had left upon my character. Were you to make enquiry, you might hear a tale in Devonshire which would persuade you to have as little of my acquaintance as possible. Compounded by my relations, a heap of lies savoured with a modicum of

truth, the tale might convince you that I was little short of a criminal. Well, when the crisis came I said no word in my defence, and I will not plead my cause now. Enough that there was a woman in the background, as there always is and will be to the end of time, and for her sake I was silent. Had she refused the sacrifice, I should have remained in England and should have lived a life which would not have been worth the chronicling; as it was I went under. Wandering abroad, I drifted into Saxe-Oldenburg, to Dravstadt the capital, and became Trooper Heselton of the King's Guard. I was no hero, nor can I claim that I set my comrades any very exalted example.

It is well to be honest, and there is no temptation to be otherwise, for I care not a snap of the fingers for your praise or blame. You must take me as I am or not at all. I hated the smug people who had dealt out injustice to me, and had it been possible to revenge myself I should have done so. This satisfaction being out of my power, I just let myself go. It was easy in Dravstadt and the company in which I found myself. Social instincts were at a discount, and primitive passions had their way. We of the Guard were looked upon as a set of hard-drinking, devil-may-care scoundrels, and to label a man in this fashion helps to make a scoundrel of him. There is always a tendency to live up to the world's estimate, or down to it, and most of us found the downward process easy enough.

You might also have heard in Devonshire that few men rode straighter than I; that for muscle I matched

a famous local blacksmith who had whipped every stalwart yokel in the neighbourhood; and that I was credited with being absolutely fearless. I have accepted without denial the evil said of me, I will not deny these qualities. They had done me good service in Dravstadt. In the Guard, might was the only master, and a well-directed blow was often the only argument possible. Such arguments had earned for me the respect of my fellows, and I had recently been promoted to second in command. If some jealousy were occasioned, I fancy the men, as a body, would as soon have followed me into a charge as they would anyone.

The perusal of this letter had set me thinking of the past. Here was a sudden and unexpected link with the old country, and it would have been strange indeed if some regret had not touched me. "You should certainly return at once." The sentence sang in my ears like the refrain of an old song. I smelt the incense of a Devonshire lane in early summer, and heard the night roar of Piccadilly. I wasted no sentiment on my relations — they were not worth it — nor on the woman for whose sake I had kept silent. She had never been anything more to me than a friend I trusted, and she had played with me and deceived me for her own ends. Still, I could not help comparing what I had lost in England with what I had gained in Dravstadt, and this call to return was not to be lightly ignored.

I sat looking at the patch of sunlight flickering on the threshold; its laughter had a message for me, while the letter seemed to mark the day a special one in my

existence, a day for starting a new enterprise, or a new life perchance. I was at cross roads and must decide which way to take.

Suddenly there was a roar of laughter mingled with oaths in the yard. I saw several men in the covered way opposite leave their gambling and hurry in the direction of the gateway which I could not see from my position. I did not move; it was not policy to interfere in a quarrel. A few blows would do no harm, would do no more than let out a little suppressed energy; even a broken limb could be mended in the barrack hospital. Then came a girl's cry, and slipping the letter into my pocket, I went out. Any woman who came into the barrack yard was a fool and deserved little sympathy, but I must find out what was happening.

In the midst of a dozen men was a girl — some serving wench. She was struggling to escape from their embraces, endeavouring to keep rude hands from flinging back the hood which concealed her face, and her cry was one of indignation rather than one of fear.

"The toll is a kiss for every man who thinks you worth it," shouted a great German, and as he stooped to take the fee by force, he received a very pretty smack across the cheek which brought a colour into his face that he had never managed to get there by blushing.

I laughed, the payment was so prompt and unexpected, but in another moment I saw that the affair was likely to take a serious turn. The girl's action, instead of touching the humour in her persecutors, had

raised the devil in them. Far from laughing at their comrade's discomfiture, the fellows took it into their heads to resent the blow as an insult to them all, and were determined to have their way with the girl. Rough hands were laid on her, and in another moment she would have been helpless amongst them.

"Stand back!" I shouted, running across the yard and using my weight and shoulders to thrust the men aside. "The girl has given you an answer and put her sign manual to it on Max's face. Leave her alone."

"She's our prize, and I'll have my kiss," said a Frenchman, with an oath, and to do him justice he did his best to make it no idle boast.

Discipline was not easily enforced in the Guard, and except on duty, the men showed small respect for an officer. I used the only argument which I knew would be effectual and knocked the man down.

"Maybe there are some in Dravstadt who like your kisses; go to them," I said. "Is there anyone else who objects to the girl passing untouched? Now's his time to say so."

The Frenchman picked himself up and swore, but no one came within reach of my arm.

"You are a fool to come here," I said to the girl, "and the sooner you are out of it the better."

As I turned with her toward the gate, the trooper who sat on the upturned barrel, and who had not left the covered way, roared with laughter.

"The girl catches Heselton's fancy," he shouted, "and you have let him take her, you idiots. By all the

saints, if I didn't prefer wine to women, I'd just step across myself and dispute possession with him."

Truth to tell, a dispute with him when he was sober was no light matter. I knew by experience, and though I had managed to get the best of the fight, I had carried the marks of it about with me for days. No one seemed disposed to take his place in such an undertaking, so I did not answer him.

"Thank you," said the girl as she walked beside me towards the gate.

"Why did you come?" I asked.

"I am new to Dravstadt. I thought I could reach the palace this way."

"The palace!"

Bitter experience had made me distrust all women, and I was very sure that serving maids in Dravstadt were as full of intrigue as a ripe orange is of juice, and would lie easily. But this girl puzzled me. I noted her feet as she walked beside me. There is much character in a foot. I always look at a woman's, and partly judge her that way. Though the girl's boots were somewhat cobbled affairs, rough and heavily made, and square in the toe, her ankles were trim, and as daintily turned as any man could wish to see. I had had no glimpse of her face; indeed, she had contrived to hold the hood of her cloak so closely about her in the barrack yard that it was certain Max, who had felt the weight of her hand, would not recognise her again if he met her in the street.

Of all the garments I know, the hooded cloak worn by

the women of the poorer sort in Dravstadt was the most hideous. It successfully concealed any beauty of line or limb its wearer might possess; Venus herself would have looked squat and ill-formed in it; and the hood, which projected from the head, was so full and loose that at the wearer's will it could be drawn down to hide the face altogether.

"Yes, the palace," she answered. "Does it seem wonderful that a great lady should have a serving maid like me?"

"Very wonderful," I returned, for in looking at me as she asked the question the hood partly slipped from her head and I caught a glimpse of red lips and rounded chin. In an instant she had drawn the hood into its place again.

"Will you not show me how I can reach the palace?" she said.

We had passed out of the yard and had turned into an alley between two high walls, the barrack on one side of us, the King's garden on the other.

"There is a small door I can open for you. I have the key."

"You must be a person of some importance to be entrusted with a key into the King's private garden."

"An officer in the Guard, that is all."

"It is something, is it not?" she asked.

"We are a queer company, as you have experienced just now. Women do not easily trust themselves with men of the Guard, and if your face is as beautiful as your ankle is trim, you might easily tempt these fellows

beyond their powers of resistance. You will be wise in future not to mistake the barrack gate for an entrance to the palace."

"Not one of those brutes saw my face," she said indignantly, and then with a musical ripple of laughter she went on: "You saw more of it than any of them when this hood slipped just now, and you resisted temptation."

"I should not know you if I saw you again," I answered.

I thought there was a challenge in her tone, and I took her to be a coquette at heart. I expected her to fling back the hood, I warrant most women would have done so, but she did not.

"Besides, I have no great liking for women," I added a little contemptuously, and with some disappointment, too, perhaps.

"At least you prove that all the men of the Guard are not scoundrels. I have been told they are."

"I thought you said you were new to Dravstadt?"

"Oh, that is one of the first things a mistress tells her maid when she comes to the capital."

"This is the door," I said, fitting the key into the lock. "I have no right to open it for such as you, so a still tongue may save me from censure presently."

"I shall be dumb. An officer in the Guard might reasonably consider a serving maid fair quarry, especially when he had just rescued her from insult. She thanks you for your courtesy. If you will, you may kiss her hand."

I laughed at her impudence, but from the ample folds about her, a hand was thrust out to me, white and shapely, with never a sign of toil in it, while one foot peeped from under that horrible cloak. The attitude was graceful and not a little imperious. A strange serving maid to have such a hand and foot.

I swept the hat from my head and raised her hand to my lips.

"I am only human, you must not tempt me too far," I said.

She laughed, and ran lightly along the garden path, not hesitating which way she should take. Evidently she knew the King's garden well.

I closed and locked the door.

"You should certainly return at once." The sentence was in my brain as I went slowly back to the barrack yard, but the call was not so strong as it had been an hour ago. I was suddenly aware that I wanted to remain in Dravstadt.



I swept the hat from my head and raised her hand to my lips.
Page 10.

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CHAPTER II

I FIND MYSELF IN DISGRACE

WHEN a man of my years contracts a disease he often has it in a malignant form. True, I had not lived through two and thirty springs without feeling a tingle in my blood at the approach of a woman; all men are made that way unless there is something missing in their machinery. I had treasured a dropped glove, I had stolen a kiss, if that can be called stolen which there was little effort to defend; but I must have been a sore trial to Master Cupid in his more serious moods, for with a new spring I had cast the glove away as rubbish, and seen many lips which pleased me better than those I had touched. Now, as it were, a shot at a venture had gone home deeply. There was a sudden singing in my heart; and for a serving maid!

It was absurd. A glance, a few words, a kissed hand, were surely small matters; yet no argument could do away with this new experience which stirred within me, and which was not without a sense of pain. I did not call it love, even your physicians cannot always diagnose a disease so promptly; besides, the symptoms were misleading. No thoughts of a wife, a home and peaceful

days, came to my mind; longings more primitive than these had possession of me. I wanted to take this woman and hold her by force, against her will if necessary, hold her until she surrendered. I wanted to dare any man to touch her, or even to look at her, to crush everyone who should presume to declare there was any woman in the world her equal. The fact that she was a serving maid counted for nothing. The world had made a mistake. From a momentary vision of red lips and a rounded chin I had judged her beautiful, and that high breed in hand and foot must make her a queen whatever men might call her. It should be my mission to show the world its folly and set this woman on a throne worthy of her.

For two days duty kept me constantly about the palace. King Philip wore the crown only because he was a strong man, and must watch every corner lest an enemy should lurk therein. More than once a corner had been found which was not empty, and a speedy death had followed, or a dungeon at the castle of Syere, which was worse. During these two days I watched eagerly for my serving maid. Great events were at hand in Dravstadt; many guests were already lodged in the palace, and every hour added to the number. In passages and corridors I saw many serving maids, some pert and pretty enough, some so poor in charm that the trooper in the Guard who was proverbially unlucky with women would not have turned his head to look at them; but of my serving maid I caught not a glimpse.

So, waiting and watching, I hugged my secret, and

then found it was no secret at all. It was on the third day that Huismann touched me on the shoulder.

"You have a key to the small door in the alley yonder."

"Yes, Captain."

"I want it."

"Have you lost your own?" I asked as I gave him the key.

"No, but I must have yours. Sorry, Heselton, but His Majesty's orders."

"I have committed some offence, may I know what it is?"

"That door is not put there to assist you in your love affairs," he answered. "They are the King's words, not mine. I am not interested, but a word of warning, Heselton, the giving of that key was a sign of favour, and it is not wise to take liberties with the favours of a King."

"I thought it was for the King's safety; I never regarded it as a favour."

I said it a little hotly, and Huismann frowned, a danger signal it would be folly to ignore. He was the Captain of the Guard, a solid, pig-headed Teuton who could roar and behave like a mad bull upon occasion, but was a good fellow after his fashion. For him there was only one point of view — his own; to argue with him was as useless as giving spectacles to a blind man. By slow deliberation he had arrived at a fantastic code of honour, as wrong-headed as it was unshakable, but to do him justice he lived up to it, which I counted for

righteousness in him. Most men in the country had long ago come to the conclusion that King Philip seldom did what was right, although they kept their opinion to themselves; Huismann was convinced he could do no wrong, and took every opportunity of forcing this view upon all with whom he came in contact. It followed that the King thought a great deal of the Captain and that he was a dangerous man to offend. Policy made me friendly with him — yes, and inclination, too. I like a man who lives up to the light that is in him if that light be only the dim illumination of a rush.

“It was a small matter, easily explained,” I said carelessly; “the rescue of a woman from her too forcible admirers. Do me a favour, Captain, and tell me who it was who talked of the affair.”

“Let it rest,” he answered. “If you are careful the King may be persuaded to return you the key.”

“If I knew the man I would fit him for a bed in the hospital for a few days.”

“I believe you would,” laughed Huismann, “but how if the babbler were a woman?”

“A woman!”

“You’re the kind of man likely to have more than one affair on your hands at a time, and women, grown jealous, play the devil. I remember once in Berlin —” and then he stopped. It was a habit of his to give the prelude of a story which he never finished. Perhaps he feared to blurt out the reason why he had come to Dravstadt. “Ach! This is no time for tale telling. You will have your troop in the audience chamber of

the palace by three o'clock, Heselton. The Count arrives this afternoon," and he turned on his heels and left me.

A woman! Was she after all like other serving maids, a babbler, incapable of a still tongue if by chance her powers of seduction were called in question by her fellows? Because a man had bowed and kissed her hand, must she boast of it, and perhaps seek to enhance her reputation by mentioning that it was no ordinary man who did it but an officer in the Guard? Had I not had much work to do that day, I should have brooded over such thoughts. I was in the mood to be soured by them.

Great events were to happen in the capital consequent upon a marriage which the King had arranged after long scheming. There was to be feasting and much entertainment in the palace; a great military display was to be given in the royal park; the city was to be *en fête* and full of rejoicing for days; and for the poor much preparation had been made at the monastery of St. Cuthbert where these humbler guests of His Majesty were to be fed. So the King sought to ingratiate himself with his subjects, and provide that nothing should interfere with his will.

I had made no close study of the rights of succession to the throne of Saxe-Oldenburg. It was an intricate business, and possibly no one could have said decidedly who the real and rightful heir was, for during half a dozen generations one family after another had seized the supreme power, and retained it just so long as they

were strong enough to fight for it successfully, and diplomatic enough to escape the interference of the European powers. A strong man had arisen in Philip the Fourth. Through rebellion and bloodshed he had fought his way to the throne, and in spite of the fact that he was hated by the majority of his subjects, he had held it ever since. He had formed the Guard, binding to himself by good pay and a judicious blindness to their faults, a set of reckless men who served their own ends in serving his. He had been twice married, but no children had been given him. His heir was a niece, Princess Suzanne, but more often spoken of as the Lady of Syere — a title which had some contempt in it. In the castle of that name, situated towards the northern frontier, she was virtually a prisoner. Although it seemed certain she had had no part in them, two risings had taken place with the avowed object of placing her on the throne in her uncle's stead. The conspirators had been cruelly dealt with, so I had heard, for the second of these risings took place before I came to Dravstadt; and the King had been pleased to grant the castle of Syere to his niece as a residence on condition that she did not leave it without his permission, and he took the necessary precautions to see that his conditions were complied with. Whilst he lived, he was determined that she should not mount the throne, but he did not forget that she was the only one of his family left to come after him.

With this arrangement King Philip might have been content, but for a thorn in the flesh which, with all his

efforts, he was unable to pluck out. How much righteousness there was in the claim to the throne made by Count Christian of Varna, I am not able to say, but many important men had from time to time deserted the King's Court for the Count's. They were not only against the King but against his house. Varna lay on our eastern frontier, a small and independent State among the mountains. For the three years I had been in the Guard we had been constantly fighting on this frontier. King Philip's desire was to carry fire and sword from one end of Varna to the other, to annihilate the State, but he had accomplished little. Recently, diplomacy had taken the place of the sword, possibly because the King was convinced he could not subdue Varna, or perhaps because the European powers had intimated that he would not be allowed to overrun it with impunity. He had therefore turned to diplomacy, and had succeeded in arranging a marriage between the Count and Princess Suzanne. No doubt the Count saw considerable advantage in the match, but how far he might be considered fortunate from a romantic point of view I could not judge, never having seen the lady.

One thing was certain, Count Christian had been in no great hurry to come among us. He had put off his arrival to the last day possible, and although he was expected soon after three this afternoon, it was nearer seven when he came. I was present with my troop in the audience chamber, and knowing something of both King Philip and the Count, it was interesting to watch these two old enemies suddenly turned into friends.

The King was a big, muscular man, grown a little heavy in spite of the exercise he took. He was ugly, remarkably so, freckled of skin, and with bristly red hair; yet his face was one to arrest attention by the strength of purpose in it, backed by a certain crafty self-consciousness which he seemed to be constantly endeavouring to conceal. It was said that the Princess Suzanne had much in common with her uncle, a fact which, whether it referred to her character or her appearance, did not naturally predispose one in her favour.

The Count was a different type of man altogether. He was tall, handsome, deep-chested; a man of war, one born to command. It was easy to appreciate that Varna must always be difficult to conquer while he lived to defend it. I knew him for a fine fighter, although we had never actually come face to face on the frontier; and he had a certain graciousness and open manner which appealed to those with whom he came in contact, and suggested that he might be a generous enemy. I did not trust people easily, which was hardly to be wondered at, perhaps, and I made no exception in Count Christian's case. So far, I believe, the King and I were in agreement.

Only men were at this reception, and several officers and civilians were presented formally to the Count, Captain Huismann of course being among them. Then the King's glance met mine, but that was all — I was not presented. Evidently I was in disgrace on account of using the key to admit a serving maid into the King's garden. No, I was not angry, and most

assuredly I did not regret what I had done. The slight might have made an enemy of some men, it had small effect on me — my thick skin probably rather than any special virtue.

The audience came to an end, and the Count, with his own retinue and some members of the King's household, passed out of the chamber on his way to the apartments prepared for him. Then the King rose and went out talking to Huismann. My troop's duty was over for the time being, and I marched the men back to barracks. I returned, however, to one of the main corridors of the palace in case I should be wanted, an energy which was a little superfluous, but then there was always a possibility that I might see my serving maid.

There were many people about, some strangers, members of the Count's suite no doubt; and troopers of the Guard were on duty at various points. To-night, the first of the great entertainments was to take place — a masked ball, and I should be on duty from midnight until dawn. As I passed a passage which joined the main corridor, I heard a sound like a little hiss behind me. I turned quickly, and seeing no one, went into the passage. A few feet from the entrance a figure in a cloak stood back against the wall. It was almost dark here, and for an instant my heart thumped against my ribs as though it were pumping the life blood through an excited schoolboy instead of through a man who had had his rough and tumble with the world and cared little what might happen to him.

"I have been following you, waiting an opportunity to speak."

The voice quieted my heart at any rate, if at the same time it disappointed me. It was a man, not a woman as I had supposed, one of the Brothers of St. Cuthbert's. I had little liking for these Brothers. To my way of thinking they had more than their share of influence in Dravstadt, and were more concerned with scandal and mischief than anything else.

"What do you want?" I asked rather curtly.

"Father Anthony would like to see you."

"I have no desire to see Father Anthony, but he knows where he can always find me."

"You are too hasty. I was told to remind you of a serving maid and of a door into the King's garden."

"Out with it, man, what does Father Anthony want with me?" I asked, endeavoring, with ill-success I fear, to conceal my excitement.

"I think it is Father Anthony's mission to bring you to the serving maid," he said; "indeed, I am sure that it is, but you must not tell him I have said so much. We have severe penalties dealt out to us for disobedience in St. Cuthbert's, and I am not so strong that I can bear them patiently. All I was told to do was to bring you to the monastery."

"Who is this serving maid?"

"You do not know?" he asked in astonishment which seemed genuine.

"No."

"Nor I, sir. I thought it was some secret to which

you had the clue. No doubt Father Anthony will give you the explanation. Will you come? ”

“ Yes, I will come; but think twice, Brother, before you play me any trick. You know something of the Guard. We are not famous for dealing gently with those who anger us.”

“ I am only a messenger from Father Anthony.”

“ I spare no man who does me an injury, and Father Anthony is to me no more than any other.”

“ That is to be regretted.”

“ I should squeeze the life out of him if he fooled me as I would out of any enemy. His habit would not protect him.”

The warning might not be necessary, but I thought it just as well to speak it.

“ I play no trick, nor would Father Anthony,” he answered. “ I only tell you of a serving maid and a door into the King’s garden. They are nothing to me, of what they are to you, you are the judge.”

“ Truly, they mean more to me than a man of your way of living can guess. That is why I warn you.”

“ Even eyes under a cowl can tell a pretty face when they see one,” and he laughed — at least I suppose the dry cackling noise was meant for a laugh. “ Come, I know a quiet way where we are not likely to meet anyone who matters. There are gentlemen in the Guard who, in spite of their vices, have something of religion in them.”

“ Too deeply buried under the vices to be of much account, I warrant.”

"Not so deeply as you might think," he answered. "I know of some who will use a priest upon occasion if they can come to him without the knowledge of their fellows."

I laughed, but not at what he said; it was a little of the gladness in my soul which escaped. If this woman were at the end of the journey, I cared little what peril might beset me as I went. Such is the way of a man with a maid.

CHAPTER III

FATHER ANTHONY

THOSE who visit Dravstadt for pleasure, unless they be artists in search of some picturesque gable to put on canvas, or archeologists seeking old bricks and mortar which have defied weather and time, or philanthropists bent on showing that there are other cities more poverty-stricken than their own, see only one side of the capital, the pleasant side. The great square that fronts the palace; the double avenue which cuts through the heart of the city; the royal park or bois which, during the fashionable hours, presents a scene it would be difficult to match for gaiety and moving colour; and the Altstrasse with its shops which may compare with the best of any capital in Europe, certainly combine to make Dravstadt a very beautiful and imposing city. Judged by its beauties, it is more like Paris than any city I know, even to the many bridges which span the river. But there is another side, a squalid side, where there are narrow evil-smelling streets, and old houses which may have a picturesque value from an artistic point of view but are the homes of poverty and misery, and the hiding places of every conceivable kind of villainy. St. Cuthbert's faced a

small, decent thoroughfare called the Street of the Shoemakers, though not a shoemaker had his shop in it now, but behind the monastery was perhaps the worst part of Dravstadt. There, repulsive sights and sounds met one at every turn, and even when armed, a lonely man was not secure after nightfall. On two occasions when chance had brought me this way, I had been set upon, once by a gang of cowards who ran easily at the sight of naked steel, once by some murderous ruffians from whom I had the greatest difficulty to escape with a whole skin.

Through such devious and squalid ways my guide led me, hurrying forward a little in advance of me as though he would prevent my asking him any further questions. He took no notice of anyone we met, nor of the men lounging idly in doorways and looking ripe for any mischief. Possibly his dress was a protection in this world of villainy. My eyes glanced keenly on either side of me, and my hand was ready to protect myself at a moment's notice.

The little Brother stopped before a small door, a back entrance to the monastery which was probably known to few, and knocked. I dare say it was some special knock which served as a signal, for the door was immediately opened by another Brother who, without a word, stood aside to let us pass, and then fastened the door again, shooting home the heavy bolts which secured it top and bottom.

My companion and I went along a dimly lighted passage, coming presently to a large, bare-looking hall

down the whole length of which tressel tables and long forms were arranged.

"For the feeding of the King's poor," whispered the little Brother.

"It will be a motley crowd," I answered, "and for my part I wouldn't have such a dangerous crew gathered together."

"Hush," he said — I thought because he disagreed with my sentiments but concluded that it was the loudness of my voice he objected to, for he went on: "These are sacred precincts and we are under high protection."

It would require a miracle, indeed, to check such a crowd as would presently be gathered here if once it got out of hand, but it was no use arguing the point with my guide, so I followed him in silence.

Another door gave us access to the chapel. Architecturally, I believe, the chapel of St. Cuthbert's was noteworthy and full of historical interest. From the steps of its high altar, it was said, some follower of Peter the Hermit had preached a crusade, and in its treasury were relics of great sanctity. Legends had fastened to it like barnacles to an old ship. I am no more competent to describe its beauties than I am to judge what measure of truth lay under the legends and its sacred associations with the past, nor, for that matter, did they greatly interest me; yet, even on such a man as I was, there fell a certain awe, a vague appreciation that in the life I led there was some great lack, something wanting which, within these walls, might be

supplied had I the power to grasp it. The faint glimmer of votive candles, the steady point of light burning before one altar, the pungent scent of incense, the motionless kneeling figures here and there, the murmur of some service in progress in a distant side chapel, and the dim mystery which seemed to hang in the vaulted roof; all these things had their effect upon me and carried me back to old associations, and those observancies so lovingly taught, so long neglected and almost forgotten.

"Wait here," whispered my companion. He startled me, so far had I travelled in the space of a few moments, even back to a little chap kneeling at his mother's knee. "Wait here. I will fetch Father Anthony."

I felt rather like a boy again, doing naturally what I was told. I did not move even when I saw the tall, thin figure of Father Anthony approaching. He came to me, touched my arm, and beckoned me to follow him. I did so without a word. Had he bid me kneel, I believe I should have obeyed him just then. Yet, in this same Father Anthony was summed up my dislike of priests generally. In the sunlight I found it easy to feel contempt for him, scarcely half an hour since I had expressed my readiness to squeeze the life out of him if he tricked me; but here it seemed natural that he should command and I obey.

We passed out of the chapel and in silence went along two or three passages. Then he opened a door, and we crossed a dim apartment of some size to a small cell-like room beyond. The door dividing it from the

larger room was open, and he did not close it when we had entered. He lighted a candle which was on a small, square table in the centre of the room. Two stools were on opposite sides of the table, and he motioned me to one, taking the other himself.

"I thought perhaps you would not come," he said, pushing the candle to one side and looking at me with sharp eyes, beadlike as a bird's, and keen enough to read a man's soul. We were out of the chapel now and I felt my dislike of this man grow vigorous again.

"Since you framed your message so carefully I can hardly believe you had any doubt," I answered.

"Strange this power of women; strange that —"

"Spare me a discourse. I am not in the mood to listen. What further message have you for me?"

Father Anthony rested his chin in the hollow of his hand and looked at me fixedly while the ghost of a smile played about his lips. For all that his frame was meagre, the result of long fasts it was said, and his face sharp as a hatchet, there was strength in this man, and a subtle consciousness of power which one could not overlook but which one somehow resented.

"My message was of a serving maid and a door into the King's garden," he said slowly. "Your haste to answer it suggests that you would see the maid again."

"I came for no other purpose. But tell me, Father Anthony, how is it you trouble yourself with the affairs of a man and a maid?"

"You bid me give you no discourse, yet to answer that question would take longer than you would care to

listen. Enough that this maid needs a friend and chooses you, wisely or not I cannot tell. Did she give you no hint of her trouble as you opened for her the door into the King's garden?"

"None."

"So my task is the more difficult," he said, laying his thin hand on the table and looking at it as if for inspiration. "As a man you would help her, I doubt not; as a soldier—"

"I am a man first, a soldier afterwards," I said.

"I wonder," and again his beady eyes fixed me. "Still, it may be so. You live and work in this country, yet you are not of it; the bond of your allegiance may be made of flimsy stuff, flimsy as are a King's favours."

"That door is open, Father Anthony; perhaps it would be wise not to talk treason."

"Treason!" he exclaimed. "Can I serve God and mammon both?"

"I know not what you may attempt. I am not of the Brotherhood of St. Cuthbert."

"Nor have you wit enough to see how openly the devil goes through the streets of Dravstadt," he returned quickly.

"I came to talk of the needs of a serving maid, Father Anthony, not of the works of the devil."

"Yet, if you would serve her, you, too, must make a choice between two masters. It is heart against a glib tongue; on one side love, on the other the King."

He rose and stood by the table, leaning across it a

little to look more keenly into my eyes, to read my very soul the better.

"Loyalty would seem to be a word of small meaning with you, Father Anthony," I said, rising, too, and standing erect with folded arms. To what this priest was urging me I did not know, but I shrewdly suspected that he would not scruple to use any careless word of mine against me if it suited his own ends. I was sufficiently in disgrace already to make me careful.

"Is it the King or love?" he asked.

"The King," I answered.

"So he has bought you body and soul. You are content to wear the devil's uniform."

"The King's, Father Anthony."

He laughed contemptuously.

"A fool or a coward, I know not which you are, but one you certainly must be, and a fool I cannot think you."

I was no easy-tempered man to let such an accusation pass lightly, even though a priest spoke it; yet, there was a certain fascination in this man's attitude which was not without its influence upon me. He could not be charged with cowardice at any rate, for he spoke treason to an officer of the Guard, a man who, within an hour, could accuse him and bring upon him the King's vengeance. I did not answer him angrily, nor threaten him. He was a fanatic, I thought, a dealer in words and sounding phrases, a priest with narrow ideas which warped his appreciation of the ordinary code of honour to which most men hold.

"Bring me to this serving maid, Father; my glib tongue may persuade her that loyalty and love do not pull separate ways but go peaceably in double harness."

"Or perchance she will persuade you otherwise. Are you equal to the test?"

"At any rate I have courage enough not to shrink from the trial," I answered.

"I will bring her to you. Wait here. Where a priest fails, a woman may succeed. It is a pity, but it is the way of the world to-day. Take my blessing, my son, whether you value it or not. It may serve you in your need."

He stretched his hand towards me for a moment, murmured some words in Latin, a benediction I supposed, then turned and went out quickly. I heard his rapid steps across the large chamber, heard the door open and close again; and then with a rush I followed him, cursing my folly, for another sound had followed the closing of the door — the turning of the key.

I was a prisoner, this priest my gaoler. I had come to St. Cuthbert's secretly, the monastery would be the last place in all Dravstadt where they would think of searching for me. There was no way of escape. The windows were small and barred, placed high in the walls as though it were feared that the Brothers might at some time desire to flee from their surroundings; the nail-studded door was set deep in the masonry and gave not a fraction of an inch as I tried to shake it. It never occurred to me to suppose that the priest would return with the woman. There was no sense in locking

the door except to make me a prisoner. He and the woman had set a trap into which I had walked like the veriest fool in Christendom. And their purpose? Did they think to starve me into compliance with some scheme against the King? I laughed aloud at the idea as I turned from the door. It was like the plan of a priest and a woman, folly in it and a curious lack of the sense of honour.

The large room was almost in darkness, quite dark except for the light of the candle which shone into it from the cell beyond. I had taken but two steps from the door when I stopped. Out of the dark shadows on either side of me came life, quick life with menace. The feeble light from the cell suddenly seemed to quiver, and a flash, straight and unmistakable, was before me barring my way. That straight flash was a naked sword, and in an instant I had sprung backwards. My back was against the end wall close to the door, and my sword was in my hand.

"The King's Guard is losing an officer," said a voice, a slight chuckle in it at its own pleasantry.

I made no answer. I had something better to do with my breath than waste it in bandying words. Four men were about me. No attempt was to be made to starve me into submission; I was to be done to death by villains who were ready to earn their blood-money in the easiest and quickest way possible; scoundrels from some of the low purlieus of the city probably, to whom murder was a trade and all that concerned them was the amount of pay they could demand for their

services. It chanced that I had carried my cloak with me to the palace that evening, and I had not unfastened it from my shoulders as I talked with Father Anthony. Now with my left hand I undid it, and with a swing folded it partly round my left arm. It was a shield to baffle one blade while I parried another.

I had not to do with master swordsmen, that was evident by the manner in which the first blade crossed mine, but the next moment a vicious thrust struck the hanging folds of the cloak held far out to my left, and only just in time did I knock down a weapon to my right. If they were no fighters, they were adepts in knowing how to have a man at the greatest disadvantage, and were not troubled by any thought of honour or fair play. Wit must help me as well as my swordsmanship. The man in front of me was evidently not intended to deal a decisive stroke, he would keep me occupied while the others took the first advantage which offered. Again a point touched and was caught for a moment in the folds of the cloak, and quick as thought I disengaged the man in front of me and lunged fiercely at one of the shadowy enemies on my right. The scoundrel sent up a squeal which set the roof answering, but such men cry out easily, and there was no judging how deep his hurt might be by the noise he made. His cry did me some service, however, for his companions sprang back. The movement gave me more sword room, and my eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, I was able to distinguish their figures better. The man I had hit had not fallen; made desperate by his wound, he

might now be my most dangerous opponent, so I watched his dim form carefully.

For a moment we were all motionless; then they rushed to the attack again, and for a few seconds the air was full of the clash of steel which may have reached Father Anthony's ears, and made him tremble for the success of his scheme, if he were listening on the other side of the door. Again a squeal, and from the same man, but this time he cried before he was hurt, I fancy. I was not conscious that my point had touched him. Once more they drew away from me. By a miracle, rather than by my skill, I was untouched, but the bout had made me breathe heavily. My enemies noted it, and one of them laughed. They were as alive as I was to the fact that I must quickly tire with such odds against me. I had my back to the wall, that was an advantage, but I began to speculate whether I might not seize a position of greater advantage still. If I could force my way across to the smaller room, I might shut the door between us, or at least give them only the opening of the door in which to fight. That would lessen the odds.

Before I could decide, they were upon me again, but only three of them. One man held back. The attack was fierce and determined. Without my cloak I should certainly have failed to beat off my enemies. As it was, I was drawn a little from the wall by the feint of their suddenly giving way before me; and in that moment the fourth man rushed at me. I was unprepared. With one arm he succeeded in beating aside my weapon,

and was upon me. Possibly the darkness deceived him, and he misjudged his distance. The dagger ripped into the cloak hanging from my left arm which I had flung up to protect myself. With all my force I struck him full in the face with my sword hilt, and he dropped like a stone.

The failure of this manoeuvre somewhat disconcerted my foes. They had moved towards me to deal a finishing blow, but stopped as their companion fell and I kicked him aside so that he might not be in my way. Unless I was mistaken he was not the man I had already wounded, so I had only two whole men to deal with now, and their confusion was my opportunity to rush for the small room opposite.

I had taken but one step, when the key turned in the lock.

"You come too soon, Father Anthony," I cried as the door opened. "The game is not yet played out."

Truly it was in my mind to rid the world of this villainous priest who had plotted my murder yet had left me with a benediction.

"Heselton!"

Into the room there came a burly figure, a trooper of the Guard. I had last noted him particularly on the afternoon when the serving maid had come into the barrack yard. The wine had gone to his head then, and he had laughed at me from the top of an upturned barrel. I was glad enough to see him now.

"Are you hurt?"

"No," I answered. "Mind none of these rats. rush

the door, O'Connell. There are three to settle with yet."

"To the devil with them," he cried. "We'll just cage them and get away while we can, or maybe we'll have three hundred to deal with instead of three."

He caught me by the arm and drew me out before I could ask a question or make any protest. He shut and locked the door quickly, then sent the key flying down the corridor where it fell and jingled along the stone floor.

"May the rats be hungry before the key is found," he said; and then he caught my arm again: "Have a care, Heselton, or you'll fall over him."

Just to one side of the door lay a Brother, doubled up and perfectly motionless, not the one who had brought me to the monastery.

"Dead?" I asked.

"No, just out of breath for a bit," and then to the prostrate figure he said: "Pardon, Brother, but you shouldn't mix yourself up in these worldly matters, that's the truth of it."

"You must have hit him heavily."

"It had to be done since he had the key, and I couldn't afford to let him shout. Listen!"

The chiming of clocks broke the silence.

"That's a quarter before midnight," said O'Connell. "You'll be late, but whoever it is who has tried to prevent your presence at the ball to-night will be disappointed."

CHAPTER IV

CONCERNING A MAID OF HONOUR

THERE was the sound of approaching footsteps and, touching my arm, O'Connell gave me a low warning to be silent. I followed him quietly. We passed through the chapel, crossed the chamber in which the King's poor were to be fed on the morrow, and came to the door by which I had entered the monastery. If we were seen, no one took any notice of us; and the Brother, who appeared to live in the little cell by the entrance, found nothing strange apparently in two men of the Guard leaving the building at such an hour. He had seen me enter, and he seemed to know my companion. As he unlocked the door for us O'Connell bid him good night, and we passed into the dark, narrow and evil-smelling street.

"You know the monastery so well you might be one of the monks," I laughed.

"My knowledge has served you to-night," O'Connell answered. "Even with one man out of four disabled the odds were still heavy."

"True, and you have my thanks; but I see nothing of the three hundred you spoke of."

"In these streets they might appear at any moment."

"Had you not been in such a hurry, we might at least have rid ourselves of three enemies," I said. "I like paying my debts as I go."

"We all have our scruples," he returned. "I dislike killing men in a sacred place if it can be avoided."

"They were not so particular, nor did Father Anthony's conscience trouble him much on that score. Tell me, O'Connell, how came you to discover that I had been trapped?"

"I saw you pass through the chapel with Father Anthony. To see you in St. Cuthbert's, and in his company, was enough to set me thinking. You've made no secret of your dislike of him."

"Dislike has not turned to love in the last few hours, I promise you. But how came you there?"

"Confession," he said shortly, turning towards me, and there was a kind of challenge in his manner.

"Confession!" I exclaimed. There were points about the King's Guard which I had never suspected, it seemed.

"Maybe it's the superstition of an Irishman, maybe it's something better; anyway I go, and devil take me, what business is it of yours or of anyone?"

"None," I answered, "none, but —"

"Have no fear," said O'Connell; "the little fellow who listens to me is very good and doesn't press me too closely, knowing that a man of my sort, and in the Guard, too, must have certain matters he cannot speak about. So it was I saw you and Father Anthony together."

"And you were afraid for me? or was it for the priest?" I asked.

"I was curious. We've heard rumours that you were in disgrace over letting into the King's garden that lass who came to the barrack yard, and I wondered if she had had a hand in bringing you to St. Cuthbert's."

I had no intention of telling him the truth, nor did I want him to suppose he had hit near the mark. That he had done so increased my caution, for it was strange he should think of connecting this adventure with the serving maid.

"You are a man of vivid imagination, O'Connell," I laughed.

"If there's a mystery and a woman, you are pretty safe in connecting them," he answered, "and whether it's in love or devilry, you can never tell what a woman will do. So I waited to see you come back. I saw that Father Anthony came alone and I started to look for you. Had I not heard the singing of the steel, I might have searched in vain. The monastery has plenty of hiding places of which I know nothing."

"But why suggest that someone might wish to prevent my being at the ball to-night?" I asked.

"Only because the ball heads the festivities, and those fellows at St. Cuthbert's were making desperate efforts to prevent your taking part in any entertainment, this side of Jordan at any rate."

"You have done me a service I shall not forget," I said as we entered the barrack yard.

"English and Irish," he returned carelessly, "com-

rades, for all they quarrel so when they are at home together."

"Say nothing about the adventure, O'Connell; I have my own idea of it."

"Silence for silence," he answered. "I don't speak about going to St. Cuthbert's for confession. There are unmannerly dogs in the Guard."

"I understand," I said, and went quickly to my quarters.

That I had any definite idea about the adventure was not strictly true, but the remark might serve to frighten O'Connell if he were in any way connected with it. To be suspicious of him seemed poor gratitude for the service he had just rendered me, yet, on his own showing, he was a little too complex to be quite satisfactory. While still a young man he had made Ireland too hot to hold him and had gone to America, and if only half of what he told about his escapades in America were true, he was exceedingly fortunate to get out of that country alive. Some years of a hand-to-mouth existence in various capitals of Europe had added considerably to his experience of life before he drifted to Dravstadt, where he speedily acquired the reputation of being the hardest swearer and deepest drinker in the Guard, which was saying much, and was feared by his companions and by every law-abiding citizen with whom he came in contact. When such a man is brought under the influence and machinations of a priest like Father Anthony, he may easily become dangerous.

I will admit that prejudice may have had something

to do with my dislike of this priest until now, but tonight surely he had given me ample reason to distrust him and to hate him. He had not scrupled to suggest disloyalty to me. Guarded as his words had been, there was no mistaking their purport. There was some end I might serve; he had tested me, knew perhaps, as O'Connell did, that I was in disgrace, and might, therefore, be willing to listen. Had I shown myself ready to fall in with his plans, should I have been attacked? I thought not. Death was the alternative to compliance. What scheme was in his mind? and what had my serving maid to do with it? And then, I know not why, I thought of the feeding of the King's poor to-morrow. To the Brother who had taken me to St. Cuthbert's I had remarked upon the danger of gathering such a crowd of scoundrels together, and if Father Anthony were planning rebellion, here was a small army of cut-throats ready to his hand. Had he thought to make me their captain? Some scheme was afoot, and the sooner it was guarded against the better. I must speak to Huismann at once.

I was late and likely to find myself in greater disgrace than ever. My troop had already gone to the palace, and when I appeared, I noted that the men glanced at one another in surprise. Evidently they had overheard something said concerning my absence, and had not expected to see me. Possibly my arrest had been ordered.

I learnt that Huismann was with the King, and I sent to tell him that I must speak with him immediately.

My troop was stationed in the corridors and ante-room

adjoining the great ball room, which was empty at present save for the waiting musicians and servants. Yet the palace was already palpitating with life, and the air seemed to pulsate with excitement ready at any moment to burst into a tumult of sound and movement. There was the dull rumbling of wheels in the courtyard below, the tramping of horses, the distant murmur of many voices, and the whisper of hurrying feet.

Then my messenger returned.

"His Majesty is just leaving the banqueting hall, sir. Captain Huismann says he will see you first thing in the morning. It is impossible before."

Evidently I was in disgrace. It was unlike Huismann to treat an urgent message from me in this fashion. I had no time, however, to speculate upon the matter now, for there was the sudden throwing open of doors, and a burst of laughter and voices. The King was coming. Crowding footsteps were in the corridor and upon the staircase, the frou-frou of dresses, the clink of steel and the sharp clash of the salute. The masked ball which all Dravstadt had been talking of for weeks, which was to eclipse in magnificence everything that the city had ever known, was about to commence.

Into the ante-room where I stood with my troop, came officials and members of the household, some remaining there, some passing on into the ball room. I caught little flying scraps of conversation, the end of a jest, the last point in an argument, the conclusion of a story. Twice I heard the phrase, "She has angered the King," and one speaker shrugged his shoulders as though it were

no concern of his, while another seemed to pity the lady, whoever she might be. I pitied her, too, for angry, His Majesty was the devil.

Then the King came, walking with a group of gentlemen, some of his advisers and statesmen, Huismann among them. I thought the Captain purposely kept his eyes from looking in my direction, but the King cast me a swift glance, which was unfriendly and unforgiving. I wonder whether afterwards there came a moment when he remembered that look and had grace enough to regret it? He carried a mask in his hand, a black satin affair which had a kindlier look in its roughly shaped lines, it seemed to me, than there was in his face. It was an ugly face at the best of times, but to-night surely the occasion demanded a smile of complacency, and it was not there. I think those about him were trying to pacify him, but I saw no sign of a smile wrinkle his freckled skin as he passed into the ball room, and his eyes under their shaggy brows remained hard as flints.

Then came the Count. He was masked, but there was no disguising him. By his side was a woman, laughing with him, or at him, I could not tell which, but I knew she was capable of either, and played the coquette to perfection. Madame Laroux was a Frenchwoman resident in Dravstadt and was constantly at Court. Rumour accounted for her husband in various ways, but never suggested that he was dead. I supposed that divorce had set her free, for rumour also affirmed that she had used every wile she possessed to induce King Philip to make her his third wife. I can vouch for it

that on occasion she practised her arts on less important men than His Majesty. For the whole of a summer afternoon she had laughed with me, making the time pass pleasantly enough. I might reasonably have thought that, if I chose to become her slave, she would think no more of the King. I fancy she had given me other opportunities when I had not been in the mood to take them; recently she had certainly frowned and passed me without a word when we chanced to meet. As a lover I was evidently disappointing.

"The King is angry," I heard her say.

"Does it matter?" asked the Count, leaning towards her and whispering something which evidently pleased her.

Then she half stopped, her hand touched the Count's arm, something she said to him quickly, and then, I thought, they both looked at me. They were masked, it was difficult to be certain, but I stiffened myself a little, conscious that I was no mean figure of a man, and showed off the handsome uniform to the best advantage. The Count laughed, and still whispering, they passed on.

Guests, all masked, now came crowding through the ante-room. All that was beautiful and gallant in Dravstadt filled the palace to-night. Some of the beauty hidden behind those masks I knew; some I could only speculate upon, and wonder whether a pair of pretty lips or a full round throat was in keeping with the features which were concealed. Everywhere was the sparkle of jewels, the shimmer of satin and silk in every delicate hue, colours as rare as the evening sky wears

just after the sinking of the sun, while brilliant uniforms and decorations vied with one another in this moving panorama. Merry voices and laughter were in the air. Men and women were at play to-night. Youth was master of these revels, and age must leave its years behind for the moment or have no part in the festival.

“Which is the Princess — the Lady of Syere?”

The girl who asked the question stood close beside me.

“I hear she has not entered the ball room yet,” answered her companion, “and that for some reason the King is angry with her. Gossip has it that she received the Count in no very friendly fashion.”

“Yet a woman might well be proud of such a lover,” answered the girl. “I should.”

The confession did not appear to please her companion, for as they moved away, he was trying to convince her that Count Christian of Varna might not be all her fancy painted him, and that the world might contain more excellent lovers than he.

So it was the Lady of Syere who had angered the King, a dangerous game to play. I was anxious to see the woman who had such temerity.

There was a sudden movement at the entrance to the ante-room, the guests fell apart, leaving a clear space down the centre, and Princess Suzanne entered. She was evidently as much a stranger to most of those present as she was to me, and there was considerable eagerness to see her. She walked slowly, a young figure but with great dignity in it. Her dress was the colour of

old gold, a little severe perhaps, but falling about her in gracious folds. Her mask, which was fringed, was of old gold like her dress, and more effectually concealed her face than was the case with most of the women present. In her dark hair sparkled a band of diamonds; and they were dark eyes which looked out from the golden mask. Half a dozen women were with her, her maids of honour, scarcely less beautifully robed than the Princess, excepting one, and perhaps it was only by contrast with the others that she gave the impression of simplicity. Her dress was gray — silver gray, her mask was gray, her shoes were gray. She, too, had dark brown hair, but no jewel was in it. I saw no jewel sparkling at her throat, nor was there any jewelled buckle on her shoe to catch the light as she walked. Truly, it was a notable group of women which passed slowly into the ball room.

In spite of his anger, the King had evidently waited for the coming of his niece, and a few moments later the music of the first dance began. For the time being my duties were at an end. I might have danced had I had the mind to, and could I have found a lady willing to be seen with an officer of the Guard. We had a poor reputation in Dravstadt. Perchance Madame Laroux might have been persuaded. She was as capable of self-preservation as any woman I knew, and was not so young as she pretended, or as art made her appear. But I had no desire to dance. I stood between the ante-room and the ball room watching the brilliant scene, and wondering whether I could get speech with Huismann. The King,

with several others, was seated on a dais at the upper end of the room, and Huismann was beside him. It was impossible to speak to him now, and he looked as if he were a fixture until the ball should come to an end. I had no desire to force myself upon the King's notice in his present humour.

The Count was dancing with the Princess. It was a stately measure to open the ball, one in which only a few selected persons joined, and I noted the grace of the Princess, and of Varna, too. He was as good a squire of dames, apparently, as he was a fighter. Yes, that girl was right, he was a lover of whom any woman might be proud. When this marriage was an accomplished fact, the King would have less need of his Guard than heretofore. I might well think about leaving Dravstadt. "You should certainly return at once." The sentence from the letter I had received floated into my mind, suggesting that in England something better than this, more real, more lasting, awaited me. Was there any reason why I should remain in Dravstadt?

The stately dance came to an end, but in a few moments the band was playing again — a waltz, a strange, fascinating lilt in it, born in the dancing brain of some Hungarian master of melody. With the first bars of the haunting rhythm, Youth at a bound came into his own and held on high the sceptre of his sovereignty. This might be the palace of a king, wisdom and reverence might have their habitation in it, but to-night, before all things, it was the temple of love, of pleasure, of music and laughter, of beauty and colour, of careless freedom

and joy in the passing hour. Into my soul came the spirit of it all, a rhythmic beating was in my veins like the quick pulse of new life. The call of Youth rang in my ears, there came a desire to hold some fair woman in my arms, to dance, to laugh with her, ay, and to taste of love, and then —

“ You do not dance, monsieur? ”

I turned quickly. Close beside me was the woman in gray who had been with the Princess. Her attitude was provoking, so easy, so graceful, yet with a challenge in it, a consciousness of power, the woman's demand for the admiration and submission of the man.

“ No, mademoiselle, I am on duty to-night. ”

So fully was the music of festivity in my heart and brain, I was myself astonished at my answer. Subconsciously I suppose I was on the defensive. Not long since an unknown woman had led me into a trap from which I was fortunate to have escaped with my life. I was not to be deceived so easily a second time.

A smile parted her lips. It was a pretty mouth, shaped as a woman's should be, and the teeth were perfect.

“ Does duty forbid your speaking to me? ” she asked.

“ No, mademoiselle. ”

“ Is there not some quieter place than this where we may talk? ”

Was I still fool enough to walk blindly into a snare? Surely wisdom was not firmly seated in my brain just now, for the soft tones of her voice were an appeal, and there was a sudden overmastering desire in my soul to

be with this woman, to listen to her, to be wrapped in the delicate fragrance which surrounded her. I did not answer and she laughed at my hesitation.

"Truly, monsieur, you had more gallantry at your command when you opened the door into the King's garden for a serving maid."

I started, as well I might. Had this small affair been gossiped about all over the city? Why was the opening of that door such a crime? Slowly my eyes travelled from the dark-brown hair across the gray mask, down the soft folds of her dress, noting how white and perfect the throat was, how slim and well-shaped were the gloved hands.—down slowly to the trim ankle and the little gray shoe which just peeped out from under her gown.

"I remember you were strangely interested in my ankle then," she laughed, "perchance the rough shoe by contrast helped its beauty."

"You! It was you?"

"Is there no quieter place where we may talk?" she asked.

"Indeed, mademoiselle, I have much to say."

"Come, then, before this dance ends, and the Princess calls me. You must take me. You know the palace of Dravstadt better than I."

There was a small room rarely used. A passage from the corridor led to it, and I had little fear that interruption would come there. I led the way and was sure that no one saw us turn into the passage. No guests were in the corridor just then, and the troopers who remained there were at the far end, standing in a group and talk-

ing eagerly together. The room was small and round, a room in a tower, furnished with articles not wanted elsewhere and put there out of the way.

“There should be candles on this table,” I said.

I lit them, four of them in a wrought-iron stand.

“You have indeed found a quiet place, monsieur.”

“It is best for what I have to say, best for you.”

“For me?”

“And these old walls may have an echo in them. If the door were closed it would be better still.”

“I have your own word, monsieur, that gentlemen of the Guard are not to be trusted, and I know by experience how roughly they are inclined to handle a woman. Still, I am not afraid. Close the door if you will.”

I crossed the room and shut the door gently.

“Mademoiselle —”

I turned, then stood still, and was silent.

She was looking at me across the table. The light of the candles was upon her, and the gray mask was in her hand.

CHAPTER V

IN THE ROUND ROOM

THE world is full of beautiful women. Was not woman, at the first, God's most perfect work, the crowning gift to man in Eden? Shall she not to the end of time remain God's masterpiece?

They are in all ages, in every varying circumstance, in every land. They may go decked in jewels, clad in purple, radiant in Oriental splendour or robed in the more sober riches of the West; or they may be innocent of gems, garbed in simple fashion; they cannot be hidden even behind the tatters of poverty. They may dwell at ease in the broad places of cities, amid luxury and wealth; or they may pass through the crowded streets and alleys where suffering is, and the weary sobbing of pain. Ocean's breezes may touch them and give them salt kisses to deepen the glow in their cheeks, or along mountain paths they may climb, framed in Nature's myriad-coloured panorama, lithe of limb and splashed with the light of a golden sun.

Woman is the theme of poet's loveliest song, the inspiration glowing from the painter's canvas, the ideal fashioned from the sculptor's marble, the dream that fills the harmonies of the musician; and yet, she remains a

mystery which every lover must solve as best he may. Because one has sung of Trojan Helen, and another seen in paradise a beloved Beatrice; because one master in Florence set perfection in his picture, and another in some Grecian isle with mallet and chisel shaped his marble into a form divine; no lover shall find in any of these an adequate expression of the woman he worships. Poor fool! Since the world's artists are few, he is likely to be silent even as I was.

I stood by the door, and she let the mask fall upon the table. What shall I say of her? Can words show the glory of her hair, or the perfect oval of her face? Can they tell of the lights and shadows in her eyes? or picture the beauty of the long curling lashes? If I say her eyes were like twin pools in a wood in autumn, catching the rich sunlight and the brown and golden tints of the foliage through which it came, do I really describe them? Colour was in her cheeks, warm yet delicate, a little warmer perhaps because she knew that my sudden silence was a tribute to her beauty, and a smile flickered on her lips. She was straight and supple, lithe and active, well poised, every line and curve of her body graceful. She was so perfect that I began to look for some little flaw, and could find none. She was the ideal which a man may perchance find in his dreams, but can rarely see face to face in a real world.

"You have much to say, monsieur, yet you are slow to begin."

"I should have found it easier had you kept on the mask," I answered.

"Yet you look at me as though you liked my dress. I am glad. It pleased me to-night when I glanced in the mirror."

"It is not the dress," I answered bluntly. "Who are you?"

I could have fallen upon my knee and kissed the hem of her garment, praying her to bestow on me some little favour that might give zest to my life and make it worth the living; but I must know what treason was afoot, why I had been enticed into the monastery of St. Cuthbert, why so desperate an attempt had been made upon my life; and my only hope of being able to say all I had to say was to be brusque and somewhat unmannerly.

"Who am I? A serving maid."

"Mademoiselle, you laugh at me. I asked for the truth."

"It is true. I am a serving maid — a maid of honour to the Princess Suzanne."

"But your name?"

"Does it matter, Monsieur Heselton? — you see I know yours already. Think of me as the lady in gray, and you have a name that will suffice. Gray; it is not an uncommon name in your country, I have heard. I may please you the more if I bring to you some thought of England."

"Mademoiselle, you please me well enough, but —"

"I know what you would say; I have brought you into trouble. I have heard that the King was angry because you let a serving maid into his garden. Is that true?"

"Quite true, but that does not trouble me."

"You have not regretted your courtesy?"

"No."

"You were not angry with me?"

"For that, no."

"Then why did you not come to me in answer to my message?" she asked quickly.

Not a flicker was in her eyes as they looked into mine. Never did woman seem more innocent. There was something horrible in the thought that such beauty and such treachery could go together. Was it to be my fate always to have to do with women whose hearts were as false as their faces were fair?

"Would it not be more interesting to you to know how it happens that I stand before you now?" I asked.

"I do not understand."

"That is hardly wonderful. You and your priest thought four paid assassins were sufficient to send me to my account. You were wrong. If his squealing were in proportion to his wound, one should even now be slipping quietly out of this world, whilst another lay so still upon the floor when I left him that he, too, may be past the aid of all physicians. Set hounds of breed at your game next time, mademoiselle, mongrels have not heart enough for the sport."

Not for an instant did her eyes leave mine as I spoke.

"Who brought you my message?" she asked after a pause.

"A Brother of St. Cuthbert's. He may have been ignorant of what was to happen, but he came from Father Anthony."

Her hand, resting on the edge of the table, closed sharply, and there was an angry fire in her eyes.

"I know nothing of this, nothing at all."

"You sent a message."

"Yes."

"Reminding me of a serving maid and a door into the King's garden."

"I did."

"I was fool enough to answer it, mademoiselle," I returned, "and it led me into a foul trap."

"Not of my setting. How dare you accuse me of it?"

"I dare more than that, mademoiselle; I demand to know what scheme of rebellion you and this priest have plotted. Neither women nor priests are immune from punishment in Dravstadt, but you may possibly find me more merciful than the King would be."

If she had known how difficult it was for me to speak so roughly, there would hardly have been so angry a look in her eyes. Even while I threatened her I was wondering how I could best help her and save her from the consequences of her folly. Probably the attempt to kill me was more the priest's affair than hers; I tried to think so. It is easy to find excuses for a beautiful woman.

"I ask for no mercy, monsieur, either from the King or from you," she said proudly; "but you shall have the truth, and you may bring what accusation you like against me."

I bowed and waited.

"By mistake I came into the barrack yard the other afternoon, thinking it an entrance to the palace. You were pleased to deliver me from the ill usage of — of your companions, for which I again thank you."

"The thought of it still gives me pleasure, mademoiselle."

"I have said that I am a maid of honour to Princess Suzanne, and if I am more humble than others who serve her, I am perhaps more devoted to her interests than any of them. I alone came with the Princess from Syere, the other ladies about her to-night are of Dravstadt, appointed to attend her by the King — the garnishing of the sacrifice. Perhaps the expression may interest His Majesty when you talk to him about me, monsieur," she added contemptuously.

"The tale I tell is always a plain one," I answered.

"We were brought from Syere under escort," she went on, "a display, the real significance of which was that we were guarded like prisoners, and treated in much that fashion — a King's method of frightening a woman into submission. I suppose you were not interested enough in this State arrangement to wonder whether the Princess were willing to marry the Count of Varna?"

"No, mademoiselle, that did not interest me. I have some excuse for my indifference in the matter, since I do not know the Lady of Syere."

"You use the contemptuous title, for such it is, and it appears to taste sweet on your tongue. Evidently you are a true King's man."

"Yes, mademoiselle, and so Father Anthony discov-

ered. If you wish I will speak of her as the Princess, and if it be true, as I have heard, that she favours the King in feature, I think she is foolish to object to such a lover as Christian of Varna."

"A man who knows her no more than you do, monsieur, and cares for her as little," she answered. "At least she has something of the King's temper in her, which is more to the point than similarity of feature, and is as determined that this marriage shall not take place as the King is that it shall. Had we been less well guarded on the road from Syere, the Princess would not have arrived in Dravstadt."

"Tell the Princess it is dangerous to play with His Majesty," I said.

"I take the warning also to myself," she answered, "for I do scheme against him in this matter. Here in the palace the Princess is spied upon, and but for me she is utterly friendless. The other maids of honour are the King's creatures, paid for their services with gold or with promises. When I came to the barrack yard I was returning from a secret mission, hence my disguise as a serving maid. There were men in Dravstadt who would help the Princess, and to them I went on her behalf. I was returning empty of hope, anger in my heart, despair in my soul. They were cowards, monsieur, every one of them. Not a man dared move a step to help a woman in distress because, forsooth, they were afraid of the King. Even as you do, they suggested that Christian of Varna was a fitting mate for the Princess. It was an easy door out of a difficulty. I never

longed to be a man until these last few days, but I would this hand were as large and strong as yours that it might grasp such a sword as you carry. Heaven is my witness that the sword should be drawn and used for right against oppression."

She was magnificent as her whole frame stiffened and her little hand shot out towards me. She set my nerves tingling and my heart drumming against my ribs.

"You came to my rescue, monsieur," she went on after a pause, "you let me into the King's garden, and you did something else of which you were not aware — you gave hope back to me. I thought I had found a man."

I did not answer her. The temptation to fling every consideration to the winds, to bow to her, to let her do with me as she would, to obey her commands, ay, to barter my very soul for her, was strong; but I did not move. The silence was unbroken until she spoke again.

"So I sent you a message through Father Anthony. The Princess believed in him. I should have brought you to the Princess that she might plead with you to help her to escape this odious marriage. I know how strong for good one resolute man may be. I thought I had found that man. I waited — a long waiting, first hope in it, then despair. At last Father Anthony sent to the Princess to say you would not come."

"He lied," I answered.

"He is a priest, you are only one of the Guard," she said quietly.

"I say he lied."

"It is his word against yours."

That maddened me, not with her, but that she should doubt me. In a quick torrent of words I told her what had happened that night, what Father Anthony had said to me, how I had been attacked and how I had escaped. I would stand well in her opinion, and perchance I let the braggart show a little. The recital excited her. The colour in her cheeks glowed warmer, fire glinted in her eyes, and her figure moved almost as if she were fighting my battle with me. I ended as abruptly as I had begun.

"It seems that I have found a man," she said slowly, "but not the man for my purpose."

"If it were possible, I would help you."

"Not me — the Princess. Is it impossible?" and she laid her hand on my arm.

"What can I do and keep my honour?"

"I would not tempt a man to forfeit his honour," she said, "but I would warn him to be very sure which way his honour lies."

"I chose the way when I swore allegiance to the King."

"There is a lower, a meaner argument which comes to me, and which I am impelled to use," she went on earnestly. "I have become a schemer, and however good their cause, it is difficult for schemers to be wholly honest. That Father Anthony has deceived both the Princess and you suggests some plot of which you and I know nothing. It may be that you will discover what it is. If it be dangerous enough to cause some confusion in

Dravstadt, it may also be Princess Suzanne's opportunity. She has been a prisoner in Syere; now the King would serve his ends by marrying her to Varna, and the Count sees advantage in marrying her. She has no desire to be Christian's Queen should he presently come to sit upon that throne of Saxe-Oldenburg, nor any wish to sit upon that throne alone, even if the people should desire it, which is doubtful. Freedom for her lies only beyond the frontier. I want a man to help me place her out of danger."

"Some treason is brewing, or I had not been so villainously attacked at St. Cuthbert's to-night," I answered. "It may serve to help the Princess. If I can help her and keep my honour, I will."

"But be very sure you know which way your honour lies."

"A man always knows."

"Does he? I wonder. Life is a journey of many turnings; who can tell what may chance at the next bend in the road? I do not seek to tempt you, but I thank you for your promise."

"It is given for the sake of — of a lady in gray," I said.

"When the Princess is in safety, Monsieur Heselton, the man who has placed her there may ask any favour of me he will."

"Yet you say you do not tempt me?" I answered; and I knew that I should strive in the Princess's cause come of it what might.

"How will you let me know what you are doing, what

I am to do?" she asked. "Shall it be at the little door into the King's garden?"

"Alas, mademoiselle, I am in disgrace and no longer have the key."

"Already I have brought you into trouble," she said.

"But at the next bend in the road —"

She laughed, a little joyously, and picked up her mask from the table.

"A serving maid may pass without much notice," I went on. "By the great jewellers in the Altstrasse there is a narrow passage; it leads to a tavern called the Ange-Gardien, a quiet place, befitting its name. To-morrow evening at eight I shall be there. If I can, I will have news for you."

"I shall end by being a serving maid knowing the inside of taverns and the ways of back entrances," she laughed.

"If we are to be schemers, a tavern is safer than a church porch, or a cell in a monastery," I said.

"Much safer," she said. "I will be at the tavern at eight."

"And wear a peasant's cloak; it will effectually conceal —"

"Saint or devil," she returned quickly as she slipped on her mask. "It is time to go, monsieur."

Could I have thought of any excuse for keeping her a little longer, I would have used it, but there was none; and I crossed the room to open the door before I put out the candles. As I opened it, I started and stood still.

Down the passage came a confusion of sound, the

cries of frightened women, the hoarse shouting of angry men, and the clash of steel.

In a moment the lady in gray was beside me. Her hand gripped my arm.

“Surely it is rebellion, monsieur — and to-night!”

CHAPTER VI

THE THRESHOLD OF DEATH

THE gray lady was beside me as I rushed along the passage to the corridor.

I thought the closed door had deadened all sound to us, that the confusion had been in progress for some time, but evidently this was not the case. The music could only that moment have ceased, for the string of a violin was still vibrating, and the note ended in a shrill, spasmodic shriek as though from the last tearing scrape of the bow when the instrument was snatched out of the player's hands. A crowd of dancers came running into the corridor from the direction of the ball room, some crying as they ran, others clutching desperately at their neighbours for protection. There were men in the crowd, not necessarily cowards, but only anxious to find a place of safety for their partners. I must do the same for the woman beside me.

"Come," I said, "and quickly. My duty lies yonder."

"The Princess," she answered.

Under my breath I cursed the Princess. What should a soldier do with women when his duty is calling him?

At the farther end of the corridor a dozen men of the

Guard stood irresolutely, undecided how to act, waiting for a leader. I shouted a command to them, and they came swinging towards me with a precision which was reassuring—a small but useful fighting force.

“You must come,” I said to my companion grasping her wrist, “you must come at once, or —”

She twisted herself free and darted from my side. With the ample folds of her old gold dress held high so as not to impede her running, came the Princess, followed by two of her maids of honour. For an instant I was inclined to be scornful at her lack of courage, but the thought was only momentary. Her attitude was probably largely responsible for this confusion, and she was hardly to be blamed for hastening to take advantage of her opportunity. Great chances come seldom enough and they must be seized at the moment or not at all.

“Courage,” I heard the gray lady say. “Who knows? This may be the way of escape.”

“In which direction are your apartments, Princess?” I asked sharply.

“To the right,” she answered.

Certainly my first duty was to see these women into safety. I gave a quick order, and surrounded by the men of the Guard, we went rapidly along the corridor. But we were not quick enough to escape the rushing crowd of frightened dancers who were now pushing and struggling in their efforts to get away. Behind us the ringing of the steel became more persistent; panic had begun, and men as well as women were looking for shel-

ter. We had to struggle fiercely not to be carried past the door leading to the Princess's apartments; and as soon as the frightened crowd realised that this door was our objective, men and women became convinced that it was a way of escape which we were preventing them from taking, and fought to reach it. The Guard formed a protecting half circle about us, while I opened the door for the Princess and her ladies to pass through; but the pressure of the crowd was so great and so persistent that the men were driven back upon us. For a few seconds it was all I could do to keep my charges from being crushed. I shouted orders which the men found it impossible to obey, and while I shouted I exerted every ounce of my strength to make sufficient room to open the door, which opened outwards. At the very moment when I succeeded there came a more determined rush than ever, and although I managed to keep the door wide enough open for the Princess and her companions to creep through one by one, I was unable to help them in any other way. The gray lady was the last to go, and the pressure was at its worst then. Whether she half turned to speak to me, or whether, in spite of all my efforts, there was barely room for her to pass, I do not know; but she seemed to be caught for a moment by her dress, then to stumble forward, and as the door closed with a loud reverberation, I saw that a gray shoe had been wrenched from her foot. I never realised before that there was any sentiment in my composition, but the little gray shoe was so much a part of her it seemed to me, that to have it trodden under foot would be a

kind of sacrilege. It was difficult to stoop down and recover it, but I struggled, as determined about this small matter as I had been about anything lately, captured it, and slipped it into my tunic. This accomplished, I was conscious of hoping that no one had noticed my action.

I locked the door and took the key.

"Defend this entrance with your lives," I cried to the Guard. "I will send others to help you directly."

It takes a far longer time to set down these happenings than was taken in doing them. Only a few moments intervened between my rushing along the passage from the round room and my fighting my way back along the corridor towards the ball room. I trust I was sufficiently gentle in thrusting aside the women who impeded my progress, but I fear I cared very little what happened to any man who got in my way. There was fighting in earnest in the ball room; not only the clashing steel proclaimed it, but the hoarse shouting and the oaths. I could distinguish Huismann's guttural roar, and the stentorian voice of the King, as I pushed my way across the ante-room, shouting to men of the Guard to follow me. They appeared to have got strangely mixed up with the guests in the confusion. Some of them succeeded in obeying me; I knew that O'Connell was immediately behind me as I burst into the ball room. I think he tried to tell me something, but I could not catch what he said.

I had no clear idea what was at the root of this confusion. Although the gray lady had spoken of rebellion

as we left the round room, although the sight of the Princess running along the corridor had made me connect her with the tumult, I entered the ball room quite ignorant of what had happened. If I thought of my adventure at the monastery at all, it was only to remember that neither Father Anthony, nor any rabble from the slums of the city, was here to-night, that they could have no connection with this. That was some other scheme; this — what was this? Sword in hand I stood for an instant looking at the scene before me.

Against the wall and in corners were a few white-faced women, too terrified even to run away; here and there a man was with them, full of fear evidently, but who might have found courage to do something had he had any idea what to do. In the centre of the room, pressing towards the dais, was a fighting mass of men, the Guard struggling with a large and compact body of guests it seemed — and the Guard was having the worst of it. The heart was out of the men who appeared to be afraid to use the weapons in their hands. There was a pandemonium of sound, but little result. Not a man was down so far as I could see. Then for an instant my eyes rested on Christian of Varna. His height and figure made him easily conspicuous, and he had turned quickly as I entered the room. It almost seemed that he had been expecting this moment and was ready for it. Our eyes met; he no longer wore a mask, and the fact sharpened my understanding. He had thrown away his mask in more senses than one. I knew there was treachery and that it was of his making. How deep and com-

plete a scheme it was I did not know then, or I might have endeavoured to fight my way to him, and sought to make him pay the reckoning. Instead, I struggled to reach the dais near which the King was shouting oaths and defiance in a voice of thunder.

"For the King!" I cried, and calling to the men behind me, I plunged into the thick of the fighting.

I saw Varna move quickly, and he shouted, either some answer to me, or an order to those about him. Attention was suddenly concentrated on my little band, hurled into the midst of the *mêlée*, and it was certain that our rush put a different complexion on affairs. Swords crossed mine, and there was one man at least who was speedily convinced that he was taking part in no pageant. His weapon rattled upon the polished floor, and he collapsed beside it with a groan.

"For the King!" I cried again as my vigorous onslaught cleared me a path into the very centre of the struggling mass, and the men of the Guard, who had been fighting to little purpose so far, seemed inclined to rally round me and strike with greater resolution. The King, who had evidently been fighting at the foot of the dais, now sprang upon it, and I saw that his sword was not being used like a toy. The real struggle was there, round the dais. I heard Huismann cursing with every blow he struck, and then he, too, sprang up and was beside the King, while a dozen weapons flashed at them to cut them down from their place of vantage.

"Look, Huismann!" the King shouted, bellowing like an animal mad with fury. "You were wrong! Some

of these devils are true, or repent. The odds are not so heavy as they were."

I heard the words, but had no idea of their meaning, and had no time to think. I did not know it then, but my advent came near to reversing the whole tide of the battle, and Christian of Varna must have realised the danger. He began to roar as loudly as the King, and as though those around him were frightened of him, they seemed to swerve in a mass between me and the dais.

Again my sword beat down opposition, and another man flopped to his knees and pitched forwards flat on his face, almost tripping me and bringing me to the ground. How I escaped a thrust which would have silenced me was a marvel, but I was still upon my feet and drawing inch by inch nearer to the dais. The primitive passions were loose and running riot. I shouted as I fought, incoherent words, the expression of a savage joy in the struggle which must find vent in sound as well as action. Unless one has had experience of fierce hand-to-hand fighting such as this, he cannot know how the lust to hurt and kill takes possession of a man, gives strength to every nerve and sinew, and blots out every other thought and consideration of which his nature is capable. I was an animal just then, with only an animal's instincts, springing upon my prey with a snarl and ready teeth.

Nor was there any thought of consequences, of danger. There was just the going on to the end, whatever that end might be, with a sort of conviction that every man who stood in the way was in some manner an infe-

rior, that the life must be beaten out of him, that however breathless it might be, the shout of victory must be yours at the last. I was unconscious of making any effort to defend myself, I only thought of cutting my way step by step to the dais, using sword and fist, too, and shouting the while. Not until a fierce cry from Huismann, piercing through all the tumult, reached my ears, had I any real knowledge of what was happening.

"Liars and cheats, Your Majesty!" he cried in impotent rage. "Curse them! The Guard has been bought!"

For an instant I turned to look into the faces of the men fighting behind me, to prove the Captain's words false, and for one moment O'Connell's head was close to mine.

"It's true. Take your life while you can," he whispered.

I should have thrust my fist into his mouth to drive the words down his throat, but he was gone; and I realised that he was the only man of the Guard I saw in that backward glance.

Bought! The Guard bought! Here then was the reason for the fighting which had no result in it. They were traitors every one of them. At what moment the few who had followed me had deserted, I did not know; I only knew that I was alone. Traitors! With an oath I flung the name at them, and then shouted once again: "For the King! For the King!"

A desperate desire was in my soul to convince the enemy that I, at least, was no bought scoundrel, and I

fought with renewed and fiercer energy; but I do not think I shouted any more. The end must come speedily, and there was no doubt what that end would be. Lust for revenge, lust to make havoc while I had the power, took possession of me, took the place of expectation of victory. I was a few feet nearer to the dais, but rather to one side of it, close to the festooned enclosure where the musicians had been. The King saw me, and I think he must have remembered the glance he had cast at me earlier in the evening, and regretted it. Perhaps Huismann wished now he had sent a different answer to my message. I could have told him nothing of this treachery, but the telling of another plot might have served as a warning. I saw the King and Huismann side by side, baffling every effort made to rush the dais. Fine fighters they were, both of them; strong-handed, lion-hearted, and many a man found death or grievous hurt at the foot of the dais. Then an ill-timed blow was the Captain's undoing. His sword only cut the air, he staggered to the edge of the dais, and a dozen hands shot out and plucked him down. It was murder, no less, with a score of villainous blades to consummate it.

"Come, Heselton!" shouted the King. "They lied. They said you were a traitor. I thought to hang you to-morrow, but here's a more glorious death."

As he spoke he cut down a man who had leaped upon the dais, and with his other hand he swung round a heavy chair and brought it down upon the head of another assailant. There was a moment's respite, and the King cast into a heap the chairs which were about him,

and which had been so lately occupied by treacherous friends. They formed a barricade between himself and his enemies.

"Come, Heselton!" he cried again. "Two of us may keep this scum at bay; and I think I hear the roar of loyal men rushing through the streets of Dravstadt to help us."

Heaven knows, I strove to obey him, but as though it were feared his words might prove prophetic, that, once upon the dais, he and I might prove equal to beating off this crowd of villains, the mass of foes before me grew more compact. It was one man against a hundred.

And for the King the odds were as heavy, or heavier. I heard no roar of rushing loyalty, nor did he except in his maddened brain. He was at bay. The dais was rushed at last, the barricade of chairs beaten down, and yet for a little while he held his foes at arm's length.

I heard Varna shout an order. I did not catch the words of it, but more men were upon the dais, and I think it was a blow from behind that brought the King to his knees, the first blow of many which cut and thrust the life out of him.

I cried out with rage at my powerlessness to help him, and made one more frantic effort. A thousand swords seemed to dance and quiver before me, and one, larger, brighter, sharper than any, appeared to touch mine for a moment and crumple it up as though it were a strip of paper. A burning flash ran through my body. My hands shot out to catch something, and missed it. For a second I swayed, caught in the back by some support

which kept me slantwise in the air ; then it gave way suddenly and I fell — down, down into depths unfathomable. And with a strange twang, like the breaking of a fiddle string, the world and I parted company.

CHAPTER VII

GAOLER O'CONNELL

THE sound of a breaking string remained with me. For a long while I was conscious of nothing else, and then in a vague way it seemed to have some special meaning which I made an effort to understand, an effort repeated over and over again, extending over long periods of time, yet always without success. Presently, with the sound still in my ears, I became aware of a vast expanse over me, not much above my face, I thought; and here was another puzzle for my inefficient brain to solve. It did not trouble me like the breaking string, it was not so persistent; only when I opened my eyes, which was seldom, did the white expanse perplex me; the sound sang in my head perpetually. By degrees a certain change came into it; instead of always being the sound of a string plucked suddenly to breaking point by strong fingers, it was sometimes like the quick rasp of an uncertain and unskilled bow across the string. Gradually my mind divided these two sounds; they became points between which my brain worked backwards and forwards. They had different meanings for me, yet the one was dependent upon the other. Very dim was my understanding at first. I

seemed to be building up a theory rather than recovering the memory of a reality, but it grew at last to something like a clear and definite story. The rasping sound had come just when a woman in gray had spoken of rebellion; the string had snapped at the very moment of my failure to save the King. Then, like a meteor flash across a dark sky, came the knowledge that the Guard was false, and that into the keeping of some men of the Guard I had given my lady in gray. Perhaps the thought gave me energy enough to move, but at any rate I was only conscious of the sounding string for a long time after that.

When I opened my eyes again, I found the white expanse above me not so vast, nor so mysterious. It was only the ceiling of the barrack hospital, and I was lying on my back in one of the beds, the only bed occupied. How should any other be filled? The Guard had done no fighting to bring wounds. I may have given a little scoffing laugh at the thought, for there was a sudden movement near me, and O'Connell rose from a chair near the window.

"You!" I said. I suppose my voice was no more than a whisper, but it seemed loud to me.

"Ah, that's good. You recognise me. You are better."

"You had no need to come into hospital I take it?"

"By the powers, you're mistaken," he answered.

"On and off I've been here as long as you."

"Nurse or gaoler?" I asked, feebly contemptuous.

"Something of both," he returned. "If you didn't

get well my life was to be made a kind of eternal curse to me; if you got well enough to give me the slip, I was told of a hook high up on the west tower most convenient for hanging."

"Had I my way there should be a hook driven in somewhere for every man of the Guard," I said.

"Sure, sir, that's too wholesale. The object of punishment is to warn others; to hang the lot would be a useless waste of energy and material."

We did not argue the point further just then. The sound of our voices brought in a nurse who ordered no more talking. She was sour-visaged and rough-handed, but competent I do not doubt. I never had speech with her after I left the hospital, but for what she did she has my thanks. I began to mend rapidly once I had taken the road towards recovery, and with my returning strength O'Connell's attendance became constant.

"You're a disappointment to me," I said to him one day.

"That's not remarkable. I was born like that. I've disappointed everybody, from my mother downwards."

"You don't look the kind of stuff of which traitors are made."

"All kinds of stuff are worked up into that article, sir, and some of the most unlikely stuff, too; still, I shouldn't call myself a traitor. You see, the circumstances are peculiar."

"There are no circumstances which excuse a man for allowing himself to be bought."

"Bought! Faith, I had no chance of selling myself,

or I would have struck a bargain with gold enough in it to take me back to old Ireland. I expect my sins are forgotten there by this time."

I did not ply him with questions; it was best to let him explain in his own way.

"The Guard was bought, that's true enough, and devil take the blackguards for it; whether they've done much harm is another matter. Captain Huisman they didn't attempt to buy, and he's dead. They didn't attempt to buy you, and how you come to be alive is a marvel."

I nodded. I might learn much by listening carefully.

"They got you to St. Cuthbert's monastery and tried to kill you there; they put more than one sword through you at the ball. There's something I don't understand about the affair at the monastery, and since the ball the Count has seemed anxious that you should live; I don't understand that either."

He paused, but I did not give him any explanation of my visit to St. Cuthbert's.

"Those fellows at the monastery meant to prevent your being at the ball that night," he went on. "They were afraid of you, afraid of your influence with the men. There was a moment when the issue hung in the balance, a bad moment it was for the Count. Had the men not been so separated, I believe some of them would have followed you when you made your final dash for the dais. That might have meant the Count's death instead of the King's."

"I would they had had the courage," I said.

"It was not lack of courage which kept them back, but self-interest; and by Saint Patrick, there's nothing so wonderful in that. Every man of them is here in Dravstadt for his own ends, and what is the use in expecting too much of them? There was one other they made no attempt to buy — a poor, unfortunate Irishman. Whether they were afraid of my honour, or whether I was too full of liquor to be present when the bargaining was in progress, I do not know; but I heard nothing of the affair until it had begun, and then I did as the others. I tried to save you when I saw you going to your death."

"Together we might have saved the King," I said.

"It wasn't possible, and I never did hold with trying to do the impossible."

"Men have achieved much by attempting the impossible," I returned.

"I warrant more men have made fools of themselves at the game. I'm for life's beaten track, and whether it's King Philip or King Christian in Dravstadt makes small difference to me."

"You said we were brothers the other day, you might have tried to fight through with me for the honour of the family."

"Or may be, you would have done better to listen to my advice and shown the family's common sense. There is no sense in throwing life away uselessly, and that's what I thought you had done when you toppled back amongst the instruments thrown down by the musicians in their haste to escape."

This was the reason why the sound of a breaking string had been so persistently in my ears.

"Then the Count seemed anxious to save you," O'Connell went on. "Heaven knows why. You had come as near to ruining his plans as one man could."

"Is the Count master of Dravstadt? Do the people call him King?"

"They will as soon as he has time to get crowned."

"And the Princess?" I asked.

"She is still in the city, but who knows whether Christian of Varna will marry her now."

"And what do you suppose the Count intends to do with me?" I asked after a pause.

"That is more than I can tell. I hope for the best."

"What may the worst be?"

"There are always two sides to a question even where treachery is concerned," was the answer. "You can't expect the Count's view to be the same as yours. He has talked of making an example of you—the convenient hook on the west tower, but maybe that's only his pleasantry. I find a touch of Irish humour in him."

"I fail to see any humour in his anxiety to heal a man so that he may hang him," I said.

Still, I thought it a very likely plan for the Count to adopt. Men, hard and trained to fighting, and bought as the Guard had been, are not to be relied upon. Bought once, they might be bought again. Self-interest was certain to be the only thing which counted with them, and fear was perhaps the best means of showing

them in which direction their interests lay. The Count had something to gain by hanging me from the west tower.

It was not a pleasant probability to contemplate, and I discussed it no further with O'Connell. My wounds had made me weak; I was inclined to look upon the dark side, and the long, idle hours were tedious and trying. I found my mind alternating between two ideas: If I could escape the vigilance of O'Connell I might make a dash for freedom; should this be impossible, I might tear the bandages from my wounds and find death that way. Death I did not mind, but the manner of it concerned me greatly. How was it I had escaped? A slash across my forehead would mark me to the end of my days, but two of the thrusts I had received in my body had come nearest to closing my account. Both had been aimed at my heart, and both had just missed their mark — a miracle almost. They were grievous hurts, but they were healing rapidly now. I felt my strength returning, as it were new sap rising in a stricken tree, and with it came a desire to live. In these long hours I thought of England, of the letter with its urgent call to return; but the desire to live was most intimately bound up with the thought of a lady in gray. Even now my brain was strangely sluggish in its work. It was only by a great effort that I could conjure her image to my mind, and at the best the picture was a dim one, the face indistinct, the eyes as though they were seen through a veil, and only the gracefully curving lines of the gray figure were impressed upon me with any dis-

tinctness. But her words, and the incidents which had brought us together, became clearer and clearer to me. Body and soul she was for the Princess. I had promised to help her if I could. Did she know of my hurt? that for weeks I had hung 'twixt life and death? If not, what must she think of me? Had she gone to the Ange-Gardien tavern and looked for me in vain? She had trusted me. She had shown me that trust when we talked together in the round room, it was in her eyes as she followed the Princess through the doorway which I had kept open for her with so much difficulty. The memory of that struggle suddenly became vivid, and I thought of the little gray shoe which I had picked up. What had become of it?

I raised myself a little on my elbow to look round the room. Bare it certainly was, nothing of mine there, no clothes, no shoe.

"What are you looking for?" asked O'Connell who entered at that moment.

"Nothing," I said, lying down again.

"You'll get your clothes when you're well enough to wear them, but for Heaven's sake don't think you can slip out of my hands. I have given my word to hold you safe, and at all costs I mean to keep it."

"Cannot I buy you?" I asked contemptuously.

"I do not quarrel with a sick man," he returned.

"Nor give him a sporting chance to escape hanging from a hook."

"I have given my word."

"And I give no promise," I said; "but a warning if

you like. A caged animal may snap at its keeper and gain freedom that way."

O'Connell neither gave nor took any chances. He would talk with me amiably enough, but he watched me as a cat watches a mouse, and especially when I was pronounced well enough to leave my bed and sit in a chair. Hour by hour I improved then, and with my strength coming back to my muscles, my brain began to scheme, wild plans most of them, with no chance of success in them, but always to the same end, escape with a companion in gray.

I had just been settled in my chair one morning, the nurse had left me only a few moments, when the door opened again. O'Connell stood in the doorway, but he did not enter. There was another quick tread in the passage without, and the next moment Christian of Varna had entered. O'Connell came in after him, closed the door and stood with his back to it, whether to prevent my escape, or to see that I did my visitor no harm, I did not know.

"So you are recovering," said the Count. "I am glad."

"Why?" I asked.

The short question was not asked in expectation of any definite answer. It seemed necessary to say something, and I had no thanks to give. The sight of him reminded me of the confusion in the ball room that night, of the treachery and murder which he had instigated and carried to so successful an issue.

"You bear a charmed life," he answered, "and such

a man is always interesting; besides, I am fighter enough myself to recognise a fighter. We have never chanced to cross swords, or to get our horses within striking distance on the frontier, I think."

"No, my attempts towards that end have always been balked."

"I am sorry," he returned good-naturedly. "It would have been a fight to remember, and possibly, had it happened, we should not be speaking together now. You might have been unfortunate, or I might never have come to Dravstadt."

"Regrets are useless," I said. "You have come."

"And there was a moment when the course of events hung in the balance," he answered. "It wanted but the weight of a single hair to turn it. Fortunately, the weight fell in my favour and —"

"And the King —"

I paused, and we looked at each other squarely for a moment.

"The King died fighting," he said very slowly and deliberately. "I am glad that you did not meet the same fate."

"At least you speak generously to a fallen foe."

"And would act more generously still," he answered quickly. "I love a man, whether he fights at my side or against me. If it be against me, I will bring him to his knees if I can, but once there, I am ready to hold out my hand to help him to rise again."

"On conditions."

"Naturally. He must rise as my friend. It is not

so difficult as it seems. You are still a sick man, still smarting from your wounds, and are not fit yet to judge deliberately. Presently I will be open with you, explain my reasons for coming to Dravstadt, justify myself if I can, and put to you a proposal."

"And I am to choose whether I become a friend or remain an enemy?"

"Perhaps the choice is not so wide as that," he returned with a smile, a little grimness appearing in his face for a moment. "You must remember one thing; I cannot afford to have enemies, especially one who has brought me so near to ruin. To turn a great enemy into a true friend is not impossible, and I shall make the attempt. I am no sentimentalist. Were you a weakling, a man of no account, you might die and I should feel no regret; as it is, I see profit in your living, and I take it life has some sweetness in it for you?"

"It has more now than it had a few days since," I answered.

"The sight of the sun?" and he pointed to a bright corner of the ward.

"It is good to see."

"And the memory of a woman?" he said with an upward note of question.

"Do they not both appeal to a man?" I said.

"I heard something of a woman," he went on, "a lady —"

"A serving maid," I corrected.

"Hardly worthy of you," he laughed. "You might look higher. Still, the thought of her may help you to

understand me better, and make you listen to me presently with patience. You are tired with the attentions of this fellow, I suppose?" and he nodded towards O'Connell.

"As a gaoler, yes."

"Have I your word of honour that you will make no attempt to leave Dravstadt until you have heard my proposal?"

"The oath binds me no longer than that?" I asked.

"It ends the moment you have refused to listen to me."

"Then you have my word."

"You are no longer a gaoler," he said, turning to O'Connell, and then to me he added: "Get strong quickly. I have need of you."

He went towards the door, but on the threshold he paused.

"Here is property of yours," he said. "It slipped from your tunic when you were picked up that night. Love seems to have armoured you to some purpose, but it is strangely dainty gear for a serving maid to wear."

He laughed, and tossed upon my bed a little gray shoe. Gray — yes, and dainty still; but there were narrow, clean cuts in it, and a deep hole in the heel, and the gray of it was stained, dark and red, stained with blood — mine.

CHAPTER VIII

I COME TO HONOUR

I DARE swear I was no more a sentimentalist than the Count. Life in the Guard had blunted the finer edges of my nature, and I had had little enough to do with the delicacies and refinements of existence in Dravstadt; yet, as I took that little shoe into my hands and noted how sharply the soft material of it had been slit, how stained it was upon the side which had lain next to my body, how straight and vigorous a thrust the wooden heel had parried, a strange feeling stirred within me, a new sensation only vaguely understood. There was nothing sentimental in it, something better than that. A curious contentment came to me, a consciousness of possessing a treasure which no one else in the world had any part in; and this very sense of isolation brought with it a feeling of reverence and awe. I seemed to be in touch with that tender passion which lies in a woman's soul when the tears come unbidden to her eyes and her lips tremble in a murmured thanksgiving.

Undoubtedly this shoe had saved my life. These cuts in it must have served to change a little the direction of the thrusts which made them, and from one vigorous

blade the heel had saved me altogether. I had been under the unconscious protection of my lady in gray.

As the Count went out, O'Connell had saluted and followed him. Whether he saw what it was that had been tossed upon the bed, I do not know, and I had hidden the shoe before he returned. He appeared delighted at the Count's attitude towards me. It did not seem to occur to him that any proposal could be made that I should not gladly accept. O'Connell's philosophy of existence was sufficiently complicated to be difficult of comprehension, but self occupied the centre of it, and his code of honour varied according to circumstances. That his philosophy and honour were so regulated as to serve me on more than one occasion does not alter the statement.

Now that he was no longer my gaoler, I was free to receive visitors, and he urged me to see certain men of the Guard at once. This I refused to do in spite of his arguments to prove that I did not fully appreciate the position.

"The Guard is a power in Dravstadt," he said.

"Before I see anyone I will hear what the Count has to say," I answered.

"Whatever he may say, it is better to have the men of the Guard as friends than enemies," insisted O'Connell.

"Is that so certain? King Philip had small profit from their friendship."

"You are not a king," he said promptly, "and we are not in England, nor in Ireland for that matter.

Good or bad fortune, it depends on the point of view, has brought us to Dravstadt where things have to be looked at through a different pair of spectacles. It may be the lenses are out of the straight and untrue, but you've got to take things as you see them. What's the use of talking to a man here as you would talk to him on College Green, or on Broadway, or in Piccadilly? You might as well expect to convert a Hottentot by preaching to him in Chinese. You have to shift your ideas to fit the country. If you don't —"

"You may still have the satisfaction of keeping your honour," I suggested.

"Ay, and find six feet of mother earth to bury it in," he answered. "Faith, it is small satisfaction I can see in that. There's a woman I know in Dravstadt, a fine creature, though a bit benighted if you judge her by too high a standard; and I talked to her one day about honour. A fine thing, she says, but like silver, it's easily tarnished when the weather is damp; best put it away until the days are clear and have sunshine in them. It seemed to me she hit the nail fairly and squarely on the head."

The mention of this woman, who from being a fine creature speedily developed into a very Helen, led me to the soft side of O'Connell's character, and I, too, spoke of a woman in Dravstadt. It was easy to persuade him to go to the tavern of the Ange-Gardien and ask whether a serving maid had enquired for me. He brought back the information that she had been there twice.

"The second time the landlord tells me he had a glimpse of her face."

"Well?"

"That was all he said, but he closed his hands like this and whistled softly. Whether he meant she was hideous or beautiful I cannot tell, but it was one or the other in a superlative degree."

"There are both kinds in Dravstadt," I answered carelessly.

"Ay, but there's only one kind you would be having an interest in. Did she once slap German Max in the face?"

I nodded. O'Connell was quite ready to receive further confidence, but I said no more. I did not know how far he was to be trusted, and I had no intention of telling him that my serving maid was not what she seemed. The first time the liquor went to his head he would be likely to turn her into a jest.

I regained my strength rapidly, and I presume my progress was duly reported, for one afternoon O'Connell came to me and told me I was to go to the Count at once.

"If rumour is not lying, fortune lies at your feet," he said, "don't let honour give you such a stiff back that you cannot stoop to pick your fortune up."

No doubt he meant to warn me, but I did not question him.

The Count was seated in the room where King Philip had been wont to give audience to his officers, and transact the business of the State. With him, besides several

of the prominent men who had come from Varna, were some who had been deeply in the counsels of King Philip — traitors of the worst kind they seemed to me, but their presence served to prove how completely successful the rebellion had been.

I was kept waiting by the door for some time, and with a purpose, I thought; the Count would emphasise the altered circumstances in Dravstadt.

“Trooper Heselton,” he said presently, motioning me to approach. I noted that I was no longer considered an officer in the Guard, and I realised that he spoke as a king, conscious of his position and his power. “I promised you some explanation, and you are here that I may keep my word. That I trouble myself to this extent is in direct opposition to the advice of some of my good friends here. Since they are men who formerly served King Philip, and must, therefore, know something of you, their advice has considerable weight.”

A flicker in his eyes, as he glanced at me swiftly, suggested that he felt some contempt for these good friends.

“They believe that a speedy death is the wisest treatment for an enemy,” he went on, “and I agree with them. It is possible that your body dangling from a rope as an example to other malcontents would be the best use to which I could put you. It happens, however, that I have a sneaking fondness for any man who can use a sword as you do and wastes no time in counting the cost. Such a man touches a weak spot in my nature, which is fortunate for you.”

He paused, but I did not speak. Of the men I knew

in that room it was evident not one was a friend to me, and in the faces of those who had come from Varna I could detect no sympathy. Favour shown to me might serve to rob them of some of the fruits of victory. In his desire to save me, I could not help thinking that Count Christian had not paused to consider the cost, either, or if he had, that there was some deep purpose behind his clemency which he had not confided to his counsellors.

"You have done your utmost to uphold and defend King Philip," he continued; "let me show you that you fought in a poor cause. His people, high and low, except a few recipients of his special favours, hated him; his rule was tyranny; his treatment of Princess Suzanne a scandal; moreover, he had no right whatever to the power he wielded, and was a usurper on the throne of Saxe-Oldenburg. For long past many have come to Varna for protection, and even here in Dravstadt I have had more friends than the King. The constant plots against him are my warranty for saying so. He has incensed the European powers against him, and over and over again they have urged me to interfere, promising me their support. In such support there is always a danger, in the long run it may seriously menace the full independence of a State; so it has pleased me to choose my own time for interfering, and I have used my own methods. That is the explanation of the rebellion, and the reason for the manner of it."

Still I remained silent.

"Naturally, I have many enemies yet to deal with," he said after a pause. "I may put them to fire and the

sword, but such measures do not make for lasting peace. I would first make an attempt to turn such enemies into friends. So I come to the proposition I spoke of: I ask for your friendship."

"And the conditions?" I said.

"There are none. I am not making a bargain, nor offering a bribe. If you elect to swear allegiance to me, I shall trust you to keep your oath; if not — need I put the alternative into words?"

"A convenient hook on the west tower," I said.

"I had not settled where it should be," he answered.

"Naming no conditions, you drive me to make my choice in the dark."

"Is it not something that you are given the opportunity to choose at all?"

"It is, and for that I thank you; but there is a rough sense of honour in me and I am perplexed. It may be that my honest road lies to that hook, wherever it may be."

"That is for you to judge," the Count answered; "but remember it may happen that I have a sense of honour, too."

"Do you not plead with him too much, sir?" said one who stood behind him. "It seems to me he treats your clemency so lightly that he may well be allowed to dangle his honour from the west tower as he suggests."

I knew nothing of this man except that I had often seen him beside King Philip's chair. He had few scruples evidently, and at least half of that assembly supported his view of the matter.

"Peace, peace," said the Count. "We must not judge all men alike, and Englishmen are always difficult to deal with."

"How long have I to make my choice?" I asked.

The Count took up a paper from the table.

"I have this to read, Trooper Heselton, your answer must be ready by the time I have finished it. I cannot wait upon a man's whims and fancies. I see advantage to myself in your allegiance, greater advantage than I should obtain by hanging you. With your help I may turn other enemies into friends; without it I may find that certain dangers can only be averted by the sword. There are the facts. I am no philanthropist."

After a prolonged residence in Dravstadt, cant and hypocrisy were likely to become the substitutes for sentiment and honour. The easiest road was the one to travel, and few took any trouble to excuse themselves for taking it. There was no necessity since they only acted as their fellows did. I had travelled that same road many times, sometimes caring not at all, sometimes after a little bout with a conscience which showed curious vitality on occasion. Judged by some standards, I was a poor specimen, but at least there had been moments when I had reached upward towards an higher ideal, and in consequence had become somewhat of an enigma to my fellows. Perhaps I may quote O'Connell's warning not to let honour stiffen my back too much as a proof of this. To be hanged is no pleasant death, and the value of dangling as a deterrent to others makes small appeal to the victim; yet, I claim that something

more than self-interest prompted my choice now. The Count suggested that by living I might save others, said it to gain his own ends probably, but I thought of the lady in gray and the Princess. At least I could live to strike a blow in their defence; for now that the kingdom had been won by rebellion, the position of the Princess, and all those who served her, must be a doubtful one. If the Count had no desire for the marriage which King Philip had arranged, then Princess Suzanne must be a menace to his peace as long as she lived.

The Count finished reading and looked at me.

"I will take an oath of allegiance," I said.

Without comment the Count struck a gong, but he could not conceal his satisfaction at my decision. Many of those about him smiled contemptuously. I had chosen life rather than death as they expected, as they would have done themselves, but they were evidently disappointed that my vaunted sense of honour had not been the means of getting rid of me. Still, no one ventured to give the Count any further advice in the matter.

In answer to the gong there entered from another room, where he had evidently been awaiting the summons, Father Anthony. The sight of him made me wonder whether I had chosen aright. Our eyes met, and I can swear there was no friendliness in mine; in his steady gaze there was something compelling, something to suggest that he wished me to understand that he was not my enemy.

"I have turned one enemy into a friend, Father," said the Count.

"Sir, you are to be much congratulated."

I felt it was the priest's intention to flatter me, for his eyes were still fixed on me. I knew full well the subtlety of this man, and distrusted him not a whit less than I had done heretofore. He, too, believed he could make use of me, and I thought it extremely unlikely that his aims and the Count's would be the same. I found some security for myself in the thought; I might presently play one against the other with advantage.

The oath I was required to take was recited by Father Anthony, and was sufficiently binding. I took it and knelt to my sovereign, for king he was although yet uncrowned, and as I found a little later, no proclamation had yet been issued. I suppose he considered it diplomatic not to assume the royal title too hastily, and by his own wish he was still addressed as Count of Varna.

As I rose he turned to a man beside him who produced a sword in its scabbard.

"It is your own," said the Count, taking it and handing it to me. "Save that it has been thrust into its scabbard, it is as it fell from your hand that night. I rejoice to give it back to you, and I know how mighty a weapon will be drawn on my behalf should occasion arise."

The audience was at an end, but the Count bid me remain. Everyone withdrew, the doors were closed, and the Count and I were alone.

"Are you content?" he asked.

"I should be basely ungrateful to complain," I an-

swered. "I am still perplexed, but you, indeed, prove yourself a generous enemy."

"A friend," he answered, "and it is the nature of friends to stand by each other, to help each other. You have many enemies, Heselton, you must have realised that just now. I did not exaggerate their attitude. From them I have rescued you. So far you are in my debt, but the burden may easily be shifted. I have many enemies, too; some of them were in this room a moment ago. It has served their purpose to support me, but my will and theirs even now approach the clashing point, and then — then I shall want beside me men I can trust. I would make no bargain with you before them, but for the man I trust there is a clear road to the highest honour. I said I had need of you, I meant it; and forthwith I give you a power in the State. I look into a man's face and judge him; it is not the oath he may take that I trust in, but it is in the man himself; and when I trust I trust wholly."

"I accept the trust in the same spirit in which it is given," I answered.

"Spoken as I would wish and as I expected."

"What is the special trust?" I asked.

"Come and see."

It had been late in the afternoon when I had gone to this audience, the room had been growing dark for some time, and lights were in the corridors as the Count and I passed out together. Many men were waiting, talking together in small groups, expecting the coming of the Count. They evidently knew what was to happen, but

I noted they were chiefly men of Varna. As we passed they fell in behind us.

We came to the open doorway which by a flight of steps, with stone balusters, led down to the great courtyard. Lights were dancing in the fast-coming night, and the wide space was filled with men of the Guard, some mounted, some standing beside their horses. The confusion of voices fell to silence as we came on to the steps and stood there; only the champing of a bit here and there broke the stillness.

“Gentlemen of the Guard.”

A shout of loyalty greeted the Count's words.

“Gentlemen of the Guard, I have known you as gallant foes, I know you now as staunch friends. The peace of this State rests much in your hands, so I have no fear. I am proud to be your chief, and should war threaten us in the days to come, I could wish to ride in no better company. But to be your head, to lead you always, is not possible for me, so in my stead I give you a tried soldier, one I trust, one who is well known to you — Captain Heselton. Gentlemen, I ask your welcome for the Captain of the Guard.”

CHAPTER IX

ON THE ROAD TO SYERE

THE answering roar of welcome was enough to stagger any man; certainly I had never supposed myself so great a favorite with my comrades. I caught sight of O'Connell; his stentorian voice shouted "Captain!" just a moment in advance of the others, and then came the tumult of sound which made me start back in astonishment.

"Capitaine! Hauptmann! Capitan! Rittmeister!"

Sharp or guttural the cry, French, Spanish, German, Italian, or English, it was shouted with a will. I drew my sword and saluted the Count, then turned and saluted my comrades. Immediately every sword leapt from its scabbard with a wild ring which echoed away into the night and must have been heard far over the city.

"Such a welcome should please Captain Heselton," said the Count.

"It is unexpected."

"Yet merited," he answered, "and have I not promptly given you a proof of my faith? Your first duty should be no great hardship. To-night you will escort the Princess Suzanne to the Castle of Syere."

"Back to Syere!" I exclaimed.

He thought it a question of surprise; partly it was, but it had a note of joy in it, too. The maid of honour who had come with the Princess to Dravstadt would surely return with her to Syere. I should see my lady to-night.

The Count touched my arm and glanced sharply behind him as he gently drew me down the steps.

"It is for her own safety," he said in a low tone. "For the present Dravstadt is no secure place for her, and at Syere a strict guard must be kept for her protection. For a little while you and the escort will remain there."

"Is she a prisoner?" I asked.

"Prisoner! No. Syere is a place of refuge. I am giving into your care one who is dear to me, Captain Heselton. Need I say more?"

"I shall shield her with my life," I said.

"For the moment this marriage is impossible," he went on; "there are too many factions to struggle with, but presently — Is love killed by a little delay?"

"Never," I said, perhaps with rather more enthusiasm than I was aware of.

"Ah! We are friends in this also. Tell me, Captain Heselton, what kind of serving maid is she who wears such dainty foot gear?"

"To me, a queen; what she may be to the world I care not."

"There is the true ring in such an answer," he said. "We should have fared well, you and I, as brothers in arms, knights-errant, finding romance and a maid to be

won in the country of our wanderings. That would have been a good life, but we have to take the world as it is."

"And are not ill-content," I suggested.

He laughed, spontaneously as a boy might.

"Why, no; you hit the truth; and touching this maid of yours, however humble she may be, it is not impossible to make her a worthy mate for the Captain of the Guard. So much a king can do. We shall see to it, Captain Heselton."

We were crossing towards the wing of the palace which enclosed the courtyard on the right, and I glanced up at the lighted windows. I grew excited, for somewhere here was my lady, already cloaked and attired for the journey, no doubt. Had she peeped from one of these windows when the Guard shouted their welcome? Did she know that I was to escort her to Syere? Were any such thoughts leaping in her brain as were dancing like fire flames in mine?

As we approached a central doorway, it was thrown open from within, and half a dozen figures were silhouetted against the light behind. Only two came down the steps, a woman and a page who carried a heavy cloak. My heart sank.

The Count hurried forward, commanding me to follow him.

"Princess, were it possible I would myself command your escort," he said, taking her hand. "Since I cannot do so, I am placing you in the care of Captain Heselton."

"I doubt not he will prove a competent gaoler," she said, turning slightly towards me.

"No gaoler, but a staunch friend," answered the Count, "and as deeply in love with a woman as I am. Cannot you believe that what I do is for your safety?"

"It is difficult since you send me back to Syere and refuse to allow any of my maids of honour to accompany me."

My heart had sunk directly I saw the two figures descending the steps, now it dropped to the depths of despair.

"Princess, they were not to be trusted, they were already plotting against you. I have provided you with a page for the journey, a boy whose father and grandfather have served your house, and in a few days I will send new maids of honour to Syere."

I did not understand the position. I would swear my lady had had no part in plots against her mistress.

"The page will probably develop into an excellent spy," said the Princess.

"And I shall easily forgive him if only he brings me word that you are relenting towards me. Presently I shall come to Syere for your answer."

Two horses had been brought to the foot of the steps, and the Count assisted the Princess to mount. She was an excellent horsewoman, I had heard, and would never travel in a carriage if she could help it. The page, throwing the heavy cloak across his horse, sprang lightly to his saddle, and rode beside his mistress towards the gate.

A trooper brought me a horse.

"You will wait at Syere for further instructions, Captain Heselton," said the Count, and when I had mounted he added: "I trust your serving maid is not so difficult to please as a Princess."

"I cannot tell, but I care not much for the woman who is easily won."

"Nor I; and there are many ways of winning a woman. I shall find leisure to try them all."

He laughed as he returned my salute, a laugh that certainly betrayed no sign of a disconsolate lover. Perchance he had grown so accustomed to success that even in love defeat was not to be dreamed of. As I followed the escort through the gate, I turned in my saddle and saw the Count still standing at the foot of the steps, a fine figure of a man, one in whom any woman might see an ideal lover. In spite of what my lady had said, no doubt the Princess would end by marrying him. She would be foolish not to, seeing what great advantage it would be to her. So I found it easy to arrange other people's affairs though I was full of perplexity concerning my own.

We crossed the great square in front of the palace, and went at walking pace along the double avenue which cut through the heart of the city towards the highroad leading north from Dravstadt. The streets were crowded, and the cafés busy, but the passing of our cavalcade, some two score strong, caused no excitement. Possibly the woman's figure in the midst escaped notice. I had ordered the men to close up and form a compact body

round her, for unless the Count had exaggerated the danger, some insult might be offered to her in the streets. Nothing occurred. The people were too busy with their own concerns to give us any attention, and I could discern no signs of excitement anywhere. King Philip or King Christian, the one was as good or as bad as the other, and so long as the citizen could do his business or take his pleasure without hindrance it mattered not to him who ruled. Even a king fills no great space in the world.

I glanced along the side street towards the Ange-Gardien tavern, and wondered if my lady had been there a third time. Did she know how grievously hurt I had been? Where was she? What had become of her now she was no longer a maid of honour? Presently I would ask the Princess.

We left the city behind us and quickened our pace. Once in the country, I ordered the men to ride in more open order. I did not want the Princess to feel that she was being guarded like a prisoner. She should talk with her page without being overheard if she wished. They were riding side by side, but were not talking, I thought. The page had put on his heavy cloak, for there was a bite in the night air. We had only the light of the stars to travel by, there was no moon, and not a light twinkled to right or left of us. This road north ran through a deserted district, tracts of heath and open moorland alternating with deep hollows and thick forest. Not a dog, quick to hear the beating of our hoofs, barked a warning; there was not a sign of village or

habitation in our neighbourhood. Robbers might lurk in the woods yonder, or in the dip which we were descending, but they would hardly discover themselves to so numerous a company; or perchance some larger body of men might be hiding by the roadside bent upon harming the Princess. Something of the kind the Count must have feared, and my ears were keen to catch any strange sound borne upon the night breeze. Curiously enough, I had never ridden to Syere; after two or three miles the road was new to me, but I took good note of it. There was no telling how soon I might have to travel this way again. I was thinking of my lady left behind in Dravstadt.

We were passing through a wood, the darkness forcing us to go at walking pace, when I went to the Princess's side.

"I trust the journey does not fatigue Your Highness?" I said.

"Is it Captain Heselton?" she asked.

"At your service," I answered.

She signed to the page to fall behind us.

"You will possibly make a less brutal gaoler than I might have had, Captain Heselton."

"You are not a prisoner, Princess."

"You easily fit yourself to circumstances," she returned, "and talk the traitor's jargon as glibly as he does himself. Doubtless you will find great profit in serving King Christian."

"I know not, but Your Highness may find me useful."

"Such easy time-servers, sir, are hardly the men one trusts."

"I considered the question and decided that I might be more useful alive than dead," I answered. "At least believe that you are not a prisoner nor I a gaoler."

"Am I free to turn to right or left if I will?"

"It would be folly."

"The folly is yours if you believe the Count," she answered. "Am I less a danger to him now than when King Philip lived? Do you imagine you are to keep a bride waiting for the Count at Syere? or that any real harm threatened me in Dravstadt? Syere is to be my prison again; that is the truth of it."

"You are wrong. I am convinced you are wrong."

"A man is easily convinced when his own interests prompt the opinion."

"You are given into my care as one dear to the Count. The future lies in your own hands, Princess."

"And is far safer there, sir, than in the hands of some who have said they were ready to serve me."

"I swear that —"

"Stay. You will do no more than perjure yourself," she said. "Christian of Varna knows that by marrying me he could make himself secure. The proclamation of such a marriage would set the bells swinging in every belfry in Dravstadt, and send the flames of bonfires leaping towards the midnight sky. He has other designs, and I am a danger to him."

"If I thought —"

"I tell you he is as little desirous of this marriage as

I am," she went on quickly. "It may be that he will presently propose it, if he can find no other way to be rid of me, but I do not change my purpose. Circumstances may force Suzanne of Syere to sit upon the throne of Saxe-Oldenburg, but I swear it shall never be as your master's wife. You may bear that tale to him as soon as you will."

"Madam, I am neither your gaoler nor a spy," I answered, stung into a sharp retort.

"It is only an hour or two since you were made Captain of the Guard; mark my words, sir, you will find the rest of the treachery come easily and quickly."

"You may live to know me better."

"I think I know sufficient," and she turned and beckoned to the page. I fell back. Where was the use in arguing with an unreasonable woman? Certainly I could not question her about my lady while she was in this mood.

Presently O'Connell came and rode beside me.

"You have picked up your good fortune, Captain. You took my advice."

"I chose for the best," I answered shortly. I was not anxious to listen to the Irishman's philosophy just now.

"Faith, that's true. He who would die when he can live is a fool, unless his vocation is to be a martyr. I've nothing to say against the martyrs."

"No doubt that is a great comfort to them," I said.

"I shouldn't wonder," he answered quite seriously; "they were mostly men who were easily contented. I

gave you good advice, and I gave my opinion to the Count, too."

"To the Count?"

"Yes. He didn't ask for it, but I gave it nevertheless. I told him you were not the kind of man it would pay to hang. My brotherly feeling for you seemed to impress him and he began to ask questions."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"All I knew — and more. You're a good man, Captain, but you wouldn't have recognised yourself from my description. I'm thinking I contributed to keeping that hook on the west tower empty."

"No doubt," I laughed. "I trust the picture was not too highly coloured."

"Oh, I threw in some pretty big vices to prevent his mistaking you for a saint, and I don't suppose he believed more than half I said. The Count's no fool, so I will give you another piece of advice."

"Well?"

"Until he has proved him, he is not the man fully to trust an enemy he has just turned into a friend."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this: Every trooper in the Guard has a pair of eyes to pry with, ears longer than most men's, and tongues that can tell tales."

"Spies upon me?"

"Some, not all. They don't take me into their confidence, perhaps because they realise that in a benighted country like this an Irishman and an Englishman may discover they are brothers; anyway, they have no idea

how keen my hearing is, nor how clear a brain I carry even when the liquor has robbed me of the use of my legs."

"But the Count —"

O'Connell had gone, spurring his horse forward to rejoin the troop. He had spoken in a low tone, and was evidently anxious not to attract the attention of his comrades. I had not considered the possibility of being spied upon by the men I commanded, their shout of welcome had seemed so genuine; yet, was anything better to be expected of the Guard? It was well that I had been warned, and the men should quickly understand that I meant to be obeyed and would stand no nonsense. It should go hard with the first man I found prying into my affairs. O'Connell's information had aroused much of the primitive brute in me.

I did not imagine that the Count had spared my life and honoured me purely out of friendship. I discounted much of what he had said, and placed no great faith in his cordiality. He had some purpose to serve, even as I had in giving him my allegiance, but I did not suppose he would attempt to use me beyond a certain point. I gave him credit for having some understanding of the character of the man with whom he was dealing. The future, so far as the Princess was concerned, I did not fear; I believed what the Count had said about her, and if he had deceived me in this, a few days would probably show me the truth. About my lady I was in a miserable apprehension. Like mistress, like maid; the Princess believed me a traitor and a time-server,

would not my lady believe the same? Did she think I had become the Count's man in my own interest, and must, therefore, be opposed to all she held dear? Did she imagine I had only thought of saving my life, and was, therefore, a coward? A few moments with her and I might have convinced her; but each minute was carrying me away from Dravstadt, further from her. At Syere I was to await instructions — I should be no better than a prisoner. I might have to wait long, and in the meanwhile what might not happen? There must be scores of men ready to kneel at my lady's feet; she might easily smile upon one of them, the more easily perchance because she believed me a traitor.

We were crossing high moorland again, and I turned in my saddle to look back towards the faint glow in the night sky which marked the position of the city. A mad desire to put spurs to my horse and gallop back along the way we had come took possession of me. It would, indeed, be madness, but unless the Count came quickly to Syere I would ride in the night and have news of my lady. I planned how I would go, what precautions I would use, the methods I would adopt to escape recognition in the city. No power on earth, save death alone, should keep me from my lady. The little shoe was concealed in my tunic, and I touched it. It was as if I took an oath upon some sacred relic.

“Is the danger behind us, Captain, or before?”

I turned sharply with a muttered oath, startled, as though my inmost thoughts had been read, my scheme in danger of discovery. The page was beside me.

CHAPTER X

THE IMPUDENCE OF YOUTH

THIS was the Count's creature, and there was probably more danger to be apprehended from this youth than from all the men of the Guard put together.

"What does your mistress want?" I asked shortly.

"Nothing, Captain; nor does she choose to speak. Since you talked with her she has not uttered a word. Either you contrived to make her angry, or she is regretting the loss of your company."

"For a page you are too talkative. Were I your mistress I should have you whipped."

"You would speedily regret it. The men of my family have a habit of paying their debts promptly, and for an insult they pay tenfold."

"I should chance that and have you whipped," I answered.

"You are amusing, but I suppose you come from a barbarous country where the men are ill-mannered and the women plain."

"We think ourselves civilised."

"Then perhaps you were of no reputation in your own country?"

"Not much, I fear."

"Ah, that may account for a great deal," he answered. "You see, my family has always had a reputation in this, else I should not have been chosen page to Her Highness."

"A page should ride behind his mistress."

"I dare say, but I am somewhat new to my duties, even as you are to yours. I heard the shouting at the palace to-night, and was told it was for the new Captain of the Guard."

"Still, I think I should have you whipped. Maybe I will talk to the Princess about it."

"It seemed to me she was not impressed by what you said just now, so perchance you would get poor thanks for your advice," he returned. "Besides, be reasonable. What have I done to merit a whipping? With a tongue in one's head, it is slow work keeping silent when everybody about you can talk to his companion if he will."

"You do not find me talking."

"Exactly. That is why I fell back. I thought you might like to."

I laughed. The youngster was amusing.

"You don't lack impudence wherever you were reared."

"Nor ambition," he answered quickly. "I had no ambition to be a page. It might interest you to know what my ambition is."

"It might."

"Some day I aspire to be one of the Guard."

I laughed; yet his figure, dimly seen, was erect and easy, and it was apparent he was no bad horseman.

"You will have to grow a little in height and girth."

"For that time is in my favour."

"True."

"You are fighters in the Guard — and lovers. That appeals to me. Women predominated where I was reared, so I have come to have a great understanding of women."

"Few men can say as much."

"So I am told," he returned. "It is a useful knowledge, for if you come to think of it, men act much as women bid them. Men have ridden to victory or death because of a woman; they have philandered and grown luxurious when they ought to have been bearing hardships and facing an enemy just because some woman has fettered them in silken cords; good or evil, true or false, heroes or cowards, there is a woman in the background always. Yes, I know much about women. I dare say that is why the Count made me page to the Princess."

A spy. The Princess considered him so, and he was sharp enough to be dangerous. Still, he might be useful. He might tell me something of my lady.

"How long have you been page to the Princess?" I asked.

"Just appointed — a few days only, yet I am not quite so new to my business as you are to yours."

"I am not new to the Guard."

"No?"

"I was a trooper, then an officer, then —"

"Then Captain," he said. "Sudden promotion, wasn't it? When I came to the palace I heard you talked about and fell into a curious mistake. I thought you were King Philip's man."

"So I was."

"Then how is it you are Captain of the Guard?"

"Shall I say the right man in the right place?"

This youth was a simple fellow if he thought to trap me so easily.

"Say it and welcome, whether it be true or not. No man is called upon to tell a story of which he is not very proud. For my part, I believe in taking the road which goes straight to one's own ends, but it isn't always convenient to talk about it. It is often a narrow ditch which divides the path of treachery from the path of honour."

"Worldly wisdom, youngster, but not a high standard. A man can always see the ditch if he cares to," I replied.

"Did you shut your eyes purposely?"

"No. As it happens, I thought little about myself in this matter."

"Yours should be an interesting tale. I am an excellent listener."

"I can well believe that," I answered.

He was silent for a moment. I was thinking of him as a spy, and perhaps he understood.

"Was there a woman in it?" he asked after a pause.

"Why should you think so?"

I was wondering how I might question him about my lady without arousing his suspicion.

"Just now you were looking back towards Dravstadt, Captain, as if it wanted but a very little thing to send you galloping back there. That usually means a woman."

"Do I look that kind of man?" I asked as carelessly as I could. It was a little disconcerting that this youngster had read my thoughts so correctly.

"I cannot judge what sort of a man you are to look at since I have not seen you in clear daylight, but with every man, if he be a man worth the knowing, there is always a woman sooner or later. I thought your time had come. To some it comes late, to others far too early," and he sighed.

"Are you one of the others?"

"More's the pity," he answered, "but 'tis only spring with her and I can trust her to wait. A country maiden, Captain, with the bloom of the open air on her cheeks, and sunlight caught and imprisoned in her hair. There's the blue of heaven in her eyes, and her voice has the rippling sound of a brook under banks of flowers. It was a poor exchange for me to become page to a Princess and have only her maids of honour for company."

"Were they so ill-favoured?"

"I warrant you they did not think so," he laughed. "They made a conquest of every man they met, if any credence can be given to their own stories. There was one, not ill-looking nor ill-shaped I will allow, brown

hair and eyes, not unattractive, and because she thought it became her, dressed herself often in gray; she —"

"I think I have seen the lady," I said, and perhaps it was as well that it was too dark for him to see my face. "What of her?"

"She sought to make a conquest of me," he said complacently.

Boy as he was I had hard work not to knock him out of his saddle.

"And did she fail?" I asked sneeringly.

"She did not greatly impress me."

"Laughed at you, perhaps."

"I think not. I understand women."

"This same lady, if I mistake not, is generally thought more beautiful than most women," I said, a little hotly, for the youngster's self-appreciation angered me. "I have seen her dressed in gray as you say, and I have noted how poor and mean other women appeared when she came. All eyes turned to look at her, all men seemed ready to worship her. She laughed at your presumption, youngster, that is the truth of it. Why, by your own showing, you are in the calf stage when every milkmaid crossing a field is a Venus or a Diana. Wait a little, youngster, before you talk of women."

Even before I had finished I knew that my anger had outrun my discretion.

"So your time has come and you are hard hit," said the boy. "It was this gray lady who made you look back. Well, each to his fancy, and you may be happy on one point, I am not your rival."

"Were I a lover that knowledge would ease my soul," I said, trying to be contemptuous and discreet at the same time. "As it happens, women do not count for much with me."

He remained silent, probably angry with me. I wanted to learn more, so changed my tone.

"I believe this lady was much trusted by the Princess?"

"I have heard so," he answered.

"Yet the Count said all the maids of honour were treacherous. New ones are to be sent to Syere."

"I am not in the Count's confidence," he returned. "Perhaps he sees advantage in removing from the Princess those she trusts."

I saw the sharp hook of the spy under this tempting bait.

"Evidently you are not in his confidence," I said.

"Nor is anyone else fully, I fancy," he said. "He may have other reasons for keeping the maids of honour in Dravstadt. He is a man. Perhaps he is among those who think this particular lady in gray more beautiful than other women."

"The Count?"

"Why not, Captain? All men are not of my taste, nor yours. This woman may have plenty of silken cords with which to fetter him, and it may be a long while before we see him at Syere."

"But the Princess —"

"Ah, that's another kind of love maybe, if it exists at all."

Involuntarily, I half turned in my saddle.

"If this lady in gray were anything to you," he went on, "you might well fear a rival. Would that send you galloping back to Dravstadt?"

"No," I said sharply.

"How can you tell since you are not her lover?"

"Duty comes before love."

"You are fond of phrases, Captain," he said with a little laugh, "and have accused me of worldly wisdom. Here's more such wisdom for you: Duty and love might pull the same way, how then?"

"I should go."

"It would be a hazardous journey."

"Not the first I have taken, youngster, and I still live to tell the tale."

"You stir my ambition to be of the Guard some day."

"Probably the lady is no longer in Dravstadt," I said carelessly.

"She was when we left. I must go back to the Princess; she may want me."

"One moment. This lady —"

"I know no more of her, but we may talk of her again at Syere if you will, and maybe you will tell me some of your tales. Syere is a very prison of a place, I have heard, but you will not need to spend every hour of the day in looking after your prisoner, I suppose."

"I am not her gaoler," I said.

Whether he heard or not, I cannot tell; he had rejoined the Princess.

His babbling had set fire running through my brain.

It would have been pleasant to knock the breath out of his miserable body for speaking of my lady as he had done, for presuming to imagine she would give a second thought to so contemptible a young cockscorn; yet, what he had said about the Count brought me to earth from my flight of fancy as a shot bird plunges suddenly down from its happy way across the blue of heaven. Continually I had thought of her as my lady in gray, but she was not mine. She had given me no token of a sweet surrender, no word to mark me as more in her thoughts than any other. Long since she might have been won; or if she were still free, might she not welcome such homage as the Count's? Was it not a woman's way to love power and place? Why should I suppose she was different from other women?

Such thoughts rang their changes in my brain all night as we rode; a fierce, discordant music, strangely at variance with its accompaniment of horses' hoofs beating monotonously on the road. When the thin light of the dawn showed in the east we were on high ground, and O'Connell came to my side again.

"Yonder, Captain," he said, stretching out his arm.

In the far distance was a gray mist, mountains, the northern frontier; in the foreground below us, a forest in a valley, and at the head of the valley a rock strangely split by lightnings and tempest.

"I see nothing," I said; "nothing but a valley and a jagged rock."

"Jagged with man's ingenuity, Captain," he said. "That is the Castle of Syere."

CHAPTER XI

IN THE CASTLE OF SYERE

THE cavalcade had come to a halt to give the horses a few moments' rest before we descended the winding road to the valley below. To some of the men the scene was as strange as it was to me, and those who knew the castle were pointing it out to their companions who did not. The Princess showed no interest, which was hardly to be wondered at, since the place had long been a prison to her, and the page, who sat his horse motionless beside her, did not venture to ask her questions.

Even when the light became stronger, even when we presently continued our journey and drew nearer to Syere, it was difficult to decide where Nature's work ended and man's began. The castle was literally set and built into the solid rock; every natural formation appeared to have been utilised, and the face of the rock formed the outer wall in many places. Masonry had been built across spaces which separated one sharp pinnacle from another, and here the battlements could be distinguished, once they were pointed out. Behind them, what at first appeared parts of the rock resolved themselves into high-pitched roofs, and the tops of

towers; but, as a fact, on this side, nine travellers out of ten would have passed without realising that any castle existed there. A sheer mass of rock rising abruptly, forest at the base of it, its top split and serrated fantastically — almost like battlements, such might have been a traveller's comment. But had he gone along the winding road, as we did, he would presently have discerned that the rock was in reality a fortress which a few men might hold against a multitude. The many lines of roof proved it to be a castle of considerable size; the irregularity and different levels of these lines showed that the sides, as well as the summit of the rock, had been built upon. Squat towers, some round, some square, some roughly battlemented, and others covered with a conical-shaped roof, rose at irregular intervals above the walls. Towards the wide valley at the head of which the rock stood, and which was behind the castle from the point from which I first saw it, the ground sloped down sharply. For the most part this incline was covered with a tangle of bush and bracken, but in some places only coarse grass ran right up to the outer walls. But for some thin window slits, these walls might have been part of the natural rock. In places a creeper had clung to them, and flourished; and hard and complete as they were, birds had found many crannies in which to build their nests securely. Of the history of the castle I knew nothing. As I have already intimated, a dungeon in Syere was looked upon as a worse punishment than death, but when this ill-reputation had been earned I cannot say. I had heard

some gruesome stories of things which had happened in King Philip's reign, but from what I subsequently came to know of the castle, I have little doubt its walls and secret places saw horrible and unspeakable deeds centuries before King Philip was thought of.

The entrance was on the valley side. The road, after dipping down to a stream crossed by a stone bridge, rose steeply to the gate. A wedge-shaped piece had been cut through the sloping ground, the sides of it built up with great blocks of masonry, and at the narrow end of it was the massive gate surmounted by a watch tower. Within was a courtyard, gloomy in the extreme, for on three sides of it the buildings rose to a great height, shutting out the sunlight. One seemed to have entered the very heart of the rock. On one side, a wide flight of roughly hewn steps led up to a main entrance, another door of immense strength set deeply in blank masonry; and on the opposite side of the courtyard a cobbled incline passed through an archway into an enclosure on a higher level to the stables and guard-rooms.

Our entry awoke hollow echoes. Two or three men-at-arms saluted as we came through the gateway, and from windows high up in the walls some servants looked down. As the gate was closed behind us with a reverberation which truly had something ominous in it, I went to the Princess to assist her to dismount.

"It is very like a prison, Captain Heselton," she said.

"I shall hope to prove that I am nothing like a gaoler," I answered.

She laughed as I lifted her from the saddle, not scornfully as she had done last night when I had talked with her. Her mood had changed, and for her own sake I was glad.

"For all you may say to the contrary, I am a prisoner," she said, as we went slowly up the steps, the page following us. "Think you the face of the seneschal is that of a man bowing obedience to a mistress?"

The heavy door had been opened. In the gloomy entrance were some servants, men and women, awaiting their orders; on the threshold was a man bowing low, a grim-looking individual whose countenance would certainly help to spoil any welcome.

"A man I hate," she whispered. "Keep him out of my sight and you will render me a service. Come to me presently, Captain Heselton."

Drawing her travelling cloak tightly round her, as though she would not even have it touch her enemy, she hurried past the bowing figure, and calling two of the waiting women by name, passed quickly across the hall with them and up a flight of wide stairs. The page, still muffled in his cloak, followed her, and I was left facing the seneschal.

"Have you had any instructions from Dravstadt?" I asked.

"Only that Her Highness was returning to Syere, and that I should receive my orders from the Captain of the Guard."

"I am Captain Heselton. You will take care that

the Princess is promptly served, but you will not approach her without my permission."

His figure stiffened, and I saw anger in the sudden compression of his jaws.

"May I ask why I am not to approach her?"

"My orders," I answered. "Circumstances have altered since the Princess left Syere. You held her prisoner for King Philip, and King Philip is dead. Her Highness is a prisoner no longer."

"Nor is she a wife, which is strange, since she left here to be married," he returned with an ugly leer, showing that he had his own opinion on the situation.

"Ah, news travels slowly to Syere, my friend," I answered, "and lately we have moved rather quickly in the capital. Hence it is you find me in command here, and you may as well understand at once how things stand. You will remain seneschal so long as my orders are obeyed, not a moment longer. Is that quite clear?"

He bowed; I do not fancy he could trust himself to speak. I did not yet know what manner of man I had to deal with, but I thought he was one who would bully if he could do so safely, and, therefore, I played the bully with him. He might have received more definite instructions from Dravstadt than he said, and I determined to give him as little opportunity as possible of exercising his will in opposition to mine.

I kept him busy that morning, and duly subservient. Before noon I had visited various points of the castle, and had posted sentries. The Guard should not have too much leisure to spy upon me. Last night I had

been unable to identify the troopers I had with me, but this morning I found that several of them were strangers to me, men who had come with the Count from Varna, probably, and among the others were some well-known malcontents. Max, the German who had received so pretty a blow from my lady; Lafone, the Frenchman I had been obliged to knock down that afternoon in the barrack yard; and an Italian giant, who had more ~~than~~ once expressed his intention of sticking a knife into me on the first opportunity, but had more muscle than courage, I thought, and would certainly wait until I turned my back to him. If I showed them a little of the bully, I was diplomatic as well. I played the good comrade as well as the captain. The Count believed that danger threatened the Princess at Syere, therefore it was our business to see that no harm came to her. If the Count were anxious without sufficient cause, that was no affair of mine, I told them. I was only the Captain of the Guard, and I must see that the Guard did its duty. There was some disposition to grumble, of which I took no notice; so long as the men obeyed, they might grumble to their hearts' content.

"Now, O'Connell," I said, taking him aside presently, "name three others besides yourself upon whom I may rely."

"I couldn't, not if you offered me a front seat in glory for the information."

"Surely there are degrees in villainy?" I said.

"There's myself, and the rest," he answered.

"Are there not three others who might stand by me in a tight corner?"

His hesitation was not encouraging, but he finally selected three who might be less blackguardly than their fellows. The only reason that he chose them seemed to be that he had drunk with them on occasion, and I presume he thought he had got an insight into their characters that way. It was a poor recommendation, but the best I could get, so I arranged that O'Connell, or one of these three, should always be on guard in the corridor outside the Princess's apartments.

It was far on in the afternoon before I had completed my task of ensuring the safety of Her Highness and minimising my own danger as much as possible. Then I waited upon the Princess.

Her rooms, which were the same as she had previously occupied, were entered from a wide corridor, or long hall which, perhaps, describes it better. Save for an oak bench or two along the walls, this hall was empty of furniture. At one end wide stairs led up into it, at the other end steps led up out of it to apartments on a higher level. It was a gloomy chamber, the windows were high up, and the sunlight which entered them was held in the dusty haze of the high-pitched roof, never penetrating to the floor. How many rooms the Princess's suite consisted of, I do not know, several at any rate; I was never in any but the chief chamber, which was pleasant enough, and large enough to make the massive pieces of furniture in it look small. Three windows opened on to a wide flagged terrace, protected

by a low wall; indeed, part of this wall was of Nature's building, for this terrace looked over the sheer side of the rock. There was no way to it except through this room, and escape from it was impossible.

The Princess was alone, seated by a table, and she welcomed me with a smile.

"Have you made my prison secure, Captain Heselton?" she asked.

"I have done all I can to provide for your safety," I answered.

"You are a courteous gaoler at any rate, and take trouble to spare my feelings, but if I am not a prisoner, why does a guard stand at my door?"

"Solely to prevent your being annoyed. I have given the seneschal instructions that he is not to approach you without my permission, which means unless you wish to see him. I think he has not been used to obeying orders, and might attempt to disobey mine. If there is any other way to these rooms, I will have that approach guarded also."

"To prevent his coming or my going?" she asked.

She spoke good-humouredly, her head a little coquettishly to one side, as she asked the question. There was a certain demand for my admiration, such as all women will make at times, and I gave it readily enough. This was the first time I had really seen her, it must be remembered. At the ball she had been masked, even when she ran for safety at the sound of conflict; and on our journey to Syere the night was too dark for me to see her face clearly, and she had kept herself muf-

fled in her travelling cloak even when we had entered the castle. I could not help smiling when I thought of the rumour that Suzanne of Syere had much of her uncle in her, and had wondered whether this likeness extended to personal appearance. She was a beautiful woman. If she were not of that type which appealed most strongly to me, I have no doubt this would have been the general verdict. For me, there was only one standard of perfection. In colouring she was not unlike my lady; she had brown hair like hers, though lacking its glory; something of the same tint was in her cheeks, as though Nature had tried to copy her masterpiece and had not quite succeeded; in height they were matched, but how far apart they really were.

She saw me smile and thought I was amused because she saw through my courtesy.

"You cannot deceive me, Captain Heselton. There is no other way to these rooms to secure. Your guard at that door yonder holds me safe."

"You are not a prisoner."

"I warrant I could not move a step from these apartments without being watched."

"You are free to go where you will."

"To order a horse to-morrow, to ride out of the gate and across the stone bridge, and into the forest by any road I may choose?"

"Certainly."

"Alone?"

"Would that be safe?"

"Why not?"

"Who can tell what danger may be lurking in the forest?"

"Again you spare my feelings," she said. "I have no desire to ride with an escort of soldiers."

"It is the penalty of being a Princess that she is not as free as ordinary women. When your new maids of honour come, I trust your sojourn at Syere will pass pleasantly and be of short duration. I have no orders to curtail your liberty in any way."

"How if I choose to ride to the frontier?"

"Princess, my orders were to keep you from harm. My instructions came from one who holds you dear. How could I answer him if he came to Syere and found you gone?"

"Could I not persuade you that it would be for my happiness? Must I tell you again that Count Christian is nothing to me, never will be anything to me?"

"But your country, Princess?"

"I will not argue with you, Captain Heselton. It is enough that I know I am a prisoner, though I recognise that I have a gentle gaoler."

"A friend, Your Highness, if I may dare so far. I promised as much once to your maid of honour."

"You promised more, I think."

"It may be, but circumstances have changed since then," I answered. "If I thought — Princess, I would that maid of honour were with you now. Where is she?"

"I prefer not to speak of her."

"But —"

"Please, Captain Heselton."

What had my lady done to forfeit the Princess's good will? She stopped me so definitely that I could not question her further — not just now at any rate.

"I believe it would be folly, worse, a crime, were you to ride to the frontier," I said; "but should anything arise to convince me otherwise, you would not find me fall short of my promise. I want you to have full liberty here, Princess, and I do not wish you to feel that you are watched. You can make my duty easier by giving me your word that you will make no attempt to ride to the frontier."

"How can I? It may presently be my only means of escape."

"Will you promise that you will not ride to the frontier unless I go with you?"

She rose hastily, and crossing to the window, stood looking out over the country. There was the winding road we had traversed early this morning, and the high ground where we had halted at dawn. I could not tell what thoughts were in her mind, and she kept her face turned from me for some time.

Presently she came slowly back to the table and stood beside me.

"The barrack yard and the company of rough soldiers does not help you to understand women, Captain Heselton. They are just women, chattels, toys. You know little of the quick, eager life that is in them, the ambition, the soul, all that to them means what action and your sword mean to you. Some day you may

learn. You have my promise. I will not attempt to ride to the frontier unless you go with me."

I thanked her, and raised the hand she held out to me to my lips. Truth to tell, she had my pity. She was not a prisoner, yet she was not free.

I did not understand her, and I do not think I really trusted her promise. Something was behind her complacency. Was she bent on putting me off my guard? Did I not understand women? It seemed to me I had learnt much about them, and learnt it in a hard school, too.

I left the Princess, and I climbed a tower from which I could see the winding road that, over the high ground, led back to Dravstadt. Where was my lady in gray?

CHAPTER XII

A DOOR ON THE STAIRS

I DID not doubt that O'Connell had spoken the truth when he said there were spies in the Guard. My belief was partly accounted for, no doubt, by a distrust of the Count, latent from the first, stirred into activity by what the page had told me, and fostered hour by hour by the thought of my lady; but chiefly, I was convinced of it by the escort. Of the men I knew, all were malcontents more or less, the selection could hardly have been fortuitous; nor could it be accidental that there were so many strangers, men of Varna in whom the Count trusted presumably. During the next few days I could discover nothing to show me that I was being watched. Max the German grumbled, but he did his work; the others did it without grumbling. Perhaps I possessed some of those qualities which go to make a man a leader of his fellows. I cannot analyse what those qualities were, I only know I felt it was not my part to be led, and always wanted to order others. These men might see some advantage to themselves in spying upon me, but at a crisis, they were quite as likely to be with me as against me. Men are like that if they have a strong man to deal with; their

respect outweighs all other considerations. Probably none of them hated me, I had given them no cause, and while I enforced discipline, I played the good comrade as well; yet I was watchful for the first sign of insubordination.

With the seneschal to guide me, I got a better idea of the extent of the castle, and its arrangements. He seemed a willing guide, but his manner of showing me small secrets, as though all the knowledge he had was entirely at my disposal, did not deceive me. I was convinced there were secret ways of which he said nothing. He may have taken me for a fool. I made many excursions about the castle by myself, noted how passages and corridors stood in relation to one another, and I discovered more than one narrow stair which formed an unexpected retreat or hiding place. Some day the knowledge might be useful. To know some narrow way or winding stairhead where a good fight against odds could be waged might mean salvation. It was curious how much I lived in the future, ever thinking of it, constantly preparing for it.

I also penetrated to the dungeons, which had no tenants now the seneschal had told me. I went alone, armed and with a lantern, telling no one. There were dungeons dimly lighted from narrow slits in the thick masonry, but deeper still, down an evil-smelling stairway which somehow gave the impression that captives who once descended it seldom mounted it again, there were chambers into which no light came, black, pestiferous, unholy. By the light of the lantern I saw bones

in one of them. God knows how long they had been there, but once they had moved in the free air under the sun — a man. Here was a veritable labyrinth in the rock's heart, and I went carefully, marking each turn I took, and testing the ground in front of me at each step lest some hidden trap should suddenly yawn destruction at my feet.

And while I made myself acquainted with the castle, I was constantly watching for the page. He was the only person to whom I could talk about my lady, and although he would probably make me furious in less than five minutes, I longed to talk to him. So far as I could discover, he never left the Princess's apartments. O'Connell had not seen him, nor the other men on guard; yet when I visited the Princess I never saw him with her. When I mentioned him she said she wished to see as little as possible of a spy.

Her Highness puzzled me. She made no use of her liberty, although I urged her to do so. She would not leave her rooms. Her exercise she took upon the terrace. Besides the page, the only persons she had to serve her were the two women she had called by name when we first entered the castle. At first I was inclined to think she was merely capricious and found a certain satisfaction in behaving as though she were a prisoner, but I soon came to the conclusion that she had some design in her mind which she was anxious that I should not discover. Yet she seemed to like my company. On one pretext or another she sent for me constantly, her only excuse being that she was lonely.

"I wish the Count would send you the maids of honour he promised," I said on one occasion.

"Is it so disagreeable to you to bear with me for an hour?"

It was not the first time she had wilfully misunderstood my meaning, but it was always done so charmingly that resentment was impossible. I was rather inclined to accuse myself of being boorish and found myself apologetically climbing out of the difficulty.

"I was thinking, Princess, that a rough soldier such as I am must be poor sort of company for you," I remarked.

"I have seldom heard a man so unjust to himself as you are, Captain Heselton," she answered.

"Within limits, I have a very good opinion of myself, and wisdom enough not to overstep those limits. You make your life duller than it need be, Princess. Why do you not ride?"

"I should hate an escort. A gallop in absolute freedom, and alone, I could enjoy, but with soldiers jingling behind me — no, that does not appeal to me."

"If I were your only escort?" I suggested.

"You tempt me," was the prompt answer.

"Then to-morrow I will have horses ready."

"I thank you, but no, I will not ride. Truly, there is only one road I should care to take, that which leads to the frontier, and you have my promise about that."

"If only that maid of honour you trusted were here, the lady —"

"I do not want to talk of her," she interrupted

rather petulantly. My subtle endeavour to make her speak of my lady was a failure.

"Is your page no good as a companion?" I asked. She laughed.

"A boy! and, moreover, a spy."

"I see nothing of him. Were he a spy I think I should have caught him."

"Oh, it is on me he keeps watch," she said; "but I assure you it is poor satisfaction the Count will have from any tales he can tell. He will only learn that I hate him more with the passage of each hour."

"Why?"

"A man's question; it is one a woman would never ask. Can a woman explain why she loves one man and hates another? I think not, or we should never have such strange marriages, beauty with the beast, nobility with meanness, understanding with ignorance. I suppose a woman usually loves unwisely, but too well."

"I have no experience," I said with a grim smile.

"That is hard to believe," she said after a pause, during which she looked at me fixedly. "Tell me, Captain Heselton, in your country what is it about a woman which makes a man worship her?"

"A pretty face, Princess. The man might not admit it, but that's the root of it."

"So he marries a pretty face?"

"I said nothing of marriage. A man does not always marry where he loves. He may marry some other woman for position, for money, for a score of reasons, and may pass a fairly happy and contented existence."

"How unromantic — if it be true. You have no experience remember."

"We have a saying that those who look on see most of the game. I doubt not love counts for much, but for many men and women it is not everything. Wisdom will have her say in the business, and often her arguments are irresistible."

"For myself —" she began, and then paused as her handkerchief slipped to the floor. I picked it up and handed it to her.

"Indeed, Princess, you were in my mind," I said. "I cannot see why you should so hate the Count, and wisdom has many arguments why you should listen to him. The peace and welfare of your country both demand that you should help to rule it."

"It is nothing, I suppose, that Count Christian murdered my uncle?" she said.

I admitted this obstacle, but gave many reasons why it should be overcome, using some of the arguments the Count had used for his rebellion. Indeed, I became quite eloquent on his behalf. Possibly what the page had told me lurked in my mind and made me interested in the Count's marriage, but there was also a fear for the Princess. If she would not marry him, what action would the Count take? He had given ample evidence that half measures had no place in his policy. If he could not remove so dangerous a rival as the Princess from his path by marriage, how would he make himself safe? Death. It seemed the only answer. I did not tell the Princess that such a fear was in my mind, but

its presence gave me a full flood of words. She listened to me, leaning against the table, her chin resting upon her clasped hands, a smile upon her lips. She was a beautiful woman; her present attitude made me realise the fact more clearly than I had done before.

"And, indeed, Princess, I do not wonder the Count is in love," I said, a look of admiration in my eyes it may be; "in this case love and wisdom are in agreement, I think."

"Thank you, Captain Heselton. Nothing in what you say pleases me except the end of it. I am glad you think a man might love me, wisdom or no wisdom, but such is not the case with Count Christian. As I have told you, he desires this marriage as little as I do; but whereas he may think it necessary for his own ends, I will never consent to it. Did he give you a commission to play proxy for him? I doubt if he could have argued his own case any better."

"I have received no commission," I answered.

"It is a difficult case, is it not?"

I did not answer. Something in the tone in which the question was asked suggested that she had looked to the end even as I had.

"If Suzanne of Syere will not marry, then —"

She paused, and some effort was needed to prevent my murmuring a finish to the sentence. A smile was still upon her lips. Whatever thought was in her mind it brought no fear. Behind that smile lurked a meaning I could not understand. There was almost a challenge in it bidding me guess the secret if I could, and for a

space we looked at each other. Then clear vision came suddenly, as a mist may lift like a veil from a landscape and reveal all that has been hidden. Love had come to this woman. That was why marriage with the Count was impossible.

"Princess," I said, "who is the man?"

"So for a brief moment you have looked into my soul?"

"Has he no power to help you?" I asked.

"Little here, I fancy."

"His name, Princess; there is no telling —"

"Across the frontier, Captain Heselton, it would be different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that presently Captain Heselton must help me to the frontier, to the man I love. I shall keep my promise; I shall not attempt to go until you ride with me. The reward is certain."

"If I should come to serve you in this matter, there is no question of reward, Princess."

"A man cannot refuse a woman's thanks, and she has many ways of thanking him," she answered.

If by chance there were listening ears, a tale of treachery might well be carried to the Count. I had made the Princess no definite promise, yet it was plain I was prepared to help her under certain conditions. Evidently she believed the day would come when we should attempt that ride together, and trusted me; I think I, too, believed that the day for such a journey must come, that I was destined to stand between her

and the Count. She was in love, and I thought I understood her sufficiently to know that no persuasion would avail to make her marry the Count. Her only safety would be in flight. Perhaps the conviction that sooner or later I must help her had been at the back of my brain from the first, from that night when my lady had talked to me in the round room in the palace at Dravstadt. By taking so much care to learn the secrets of the Castle of Syere, had I not been preparing for such an enterprise?

O'Connell was on guard when I left the Princess. I asked him whether he had seen the page; he had not, and I left the corridor thoughtfully, descending a narrow stairway which was not much used. At times, when there was much going and coming in the castle, servants would use it since it was the nearest way to the kitchens. At a turn in it, half way down, was a small landing, and in the wall a narrow door. This door was suddenly opened and a kitchen wench stepped out quickly. I should not have spoken to her, nor taken any notice of her, had she not given a frightened little cry when she saw me.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the kitchen, sir."

"What are you doing here?"

I was not conscious of speaking roughly, but she was evidently afraid of me.

"Where does that door lead to?" I asked.

"Where I sleep, sir."

She was little more than a child in face and in figure,

and would have been pretty but for a certain haunted look in her eyes; they were eyes that had seen more than it was good for a child to see. Possibly she had known rough treatment and blows. It was hateful to see the way she shrank from me as though she expected me to strike her. I knew she was telling a lie.

"Let me see where you sleep," I said.

"No."

The answer was sharp as she put herself before the door and spread out her arms.

"I must."

She was afraid of me, yet she did not move, and her eyes were fixed on mine, steady and determined. She would not obey a command; I should have to use force to move her.

"Who was it told you not to let anyone pass that door?" I asked.

"It is where I sleep."

"And what secret do you nightly carry to rest with you?"

"None, sir."

"Then let me see."

"No."

The child's courage was fascinating, for she fully expected to be ill-treated. I saw that in her eyes and trembling little figure.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are afraid of me?"

"No," she said stoutly, still with fear in her eyes.

"Then supposing we become friends," I said. "Friends tell each other secrets. Tell me yours. No one in Syere shall touch you or harm you."

"I have no secrets — yes, one."

"Tell me."

"You must tell me one first."

It was childish, this talk, and I laughed. What secret should I tell her?

"I am in love," I said.

"With the Princess?" she asked.

The question was startling. This child could not have thought of it herself; she must have heard some talk to put such a question in her mind. Was such a story going about the castle?

"No," I answered. "Men like I am do not love Princesses."

"They do often," she contradicted.

"Well, I've told you my secret, now for yours."

"The Captain of the Guard has enemies in Syere," she whispered.

"That's no secret."

"And some day a little kitchen maid may help him."

"When?"

"Perhaps when there is no one else who can," she answered.

It might be fancy on her part, but the child evidently believed in her power to do me a service.

"Yes, that is a good secret, but —"

"But I will never help you if you pass this door and look where I sleep."

I do not know whether I was really convinced that the child could help me, or whether it was her courage that impressed me. She was hiding something, possibly at the bidding of the seneschal, but I would humour her.

“Very well, I will not open the door.”

She moved away from it at once.

“Do you always trust a man to keep his word?”

“Some men, sir. I trust you.”

She ran quickly down the stairs, never looking back. I glanced at the door. The devil tempted, his weapon keen enough since it was sharp with the conviction of my own danger; yet a child's trust in me proved good armour, and I went slowly down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LADY IN WAITING

NEXT day, soon after dawn, I was on the tower which commanded the road winding up the rising ground on its way to the capital. Constantly I looked towards Dravstadt, even as a Moslem turns towards Mecca. Is it a strange simile to use, a religious observance to show the love for a woman? May they not have something in common? Indeed, I think so. Have not women drawn men towards heaven when chant and psalm and priestly admonition have failed? So I looked towards the city which held all that was dear to me, and strange awakenings stirred in my soul. I had grown rough and primitive, rusty as a staple fastened in an outer wall; the touch of love had made me remember many things, and for all the rust on it, the staple was strong enough to hold the promise of something better. So I argued often, and then again I would ask myself whether I was a fool. Was I caught and destined to be crushed, not by circumstances — I felt strong enough to fight and conquer them — but caught in a woman's toils, destined to be crushed by her indifference? I had become a man of moods. With the waning day and the

coming of twilight, when gloom filled the castle and the feeble lights served only to make the shadows deeper, when every sound held an ominous note in it and aroused a mournful echo as though the dead called to the dying; then courage failed me, every hope of my soul seemed vain, every desire of my heart far out of my reach. With each recurring dawn I became brave again. The light in the east stood for good hope; clouds, roseate with the first fire of the coming sun, glowing with it, pulsating with it, were to me as new life, life with warm blood in it, full of endeavour and the promise of achievement.

So it was to-day. There was sufficient bite in the air to sting the nerves into vigour, and to set the blood running with a tingle in it. Last night the moon, near its full, had sailed in a clear sky, paling the stars; and into a translucent sky, tinted with a myriad colours delicate as those of a shell brought from the pavement of ocean, the sun climbed up slowly, gloriously. Sunset and sunrise had troubled me little until now, but in these days had been given me a keen appreciation of the beauties in earth and sky; something of a poet's soul was mine, yet without power to express. And the reason of it all? the centre of it all? — my lady who had never given me a word of hope, nor any token that for a single hour I had been in her thoughts. Such is the power of a woman; so may a man love and worship.

This morning, in spirit, I was travelling that winding road, and had just climbed to the rising ground on my way back to Dravstadt when upon the brow of the hill

there were horsemen, a small company, and a travelling coach. They halted for a moment and then came on at a rapid pace. Could it be the Count? That his coming might be the beginning of difficulties did not trouble me. If action were forced upon me, so much the better. I was tired of uncertainty.

I was in the courtyard when the troop rode in at the gate. It was not the Count who had come. Madame Laroux and a woman servant stepped from the coach, and no doubt my face was sufficient evidence of my surprise.

"I do not wonder at your astonishment, Captain Heselton," she said. "I am astonished to find myself here. What a prison of a place it is."

She looked up at the high, frowning walls, and shivered a little, but she laughed, too. She must play the coquette, would play it on her death-bed no doubt if any consciousness at all were left in her. A night of travel, and the light of early morning, did not suit Madame Laroux. Her age showed through her artificiality, and her attempt at youthful vivaciousness had something pitiful in it. She seemed to read the thought which passed through my mind.

"But at this hour a woman is not in a condition to talk, nor fit to be seen by any man. Here you are an autocrat, Captain Heselton, and no doubt must ask me all sorts of questions, but please delay them a little."

"At least tell me what has brought you to Syere?" I said as I led her into the castle.

"I am the new lady in waiting."

Perhaps subconsciously I was prepared for this announcement, at any rate I showed no surprise, and delivered her into the hands of the seneschal. It was no part of my business to look after the comfort of Madame Laroux. Whether the seneschal knew anything of her, or whether he overheard the reason of her coming, I do not know, but his grim features were twisted into a smile of welcome, and he quickly had servants running hither and thither on her behalf. It may be that he saw in her a piece in the game which he thought he could use to his own advantage and to my discomfiture.

As soon as I could, I went to the Princess and told her of the new arrival.

"Madame Laroux?" she asked. "Who is Madame Laroux?"

I answered the question as well as I could. I knew little about her myself.

"I remember. I have heard of her," she said. "Did she not employ all her arts to try to induce my uncle to marry her?"

"There was some rumour of the kind, Princess."

"And now she serves the Count. Another spy upon me, Captain Heselton."

"The Count —"

"Oh, spare me any pleading on his behalf," she said angrily. "When it suits me to see this lady I will send for her. Am I allowed to please myself so far?"

"Certainly."

"Then she shall learn her place forthwith. Ladies in waiting who are not of my own choosing shall find they

have no pleasant mistress to serve. Will you let this Madame Laroux know my wishes, Captain Heselton?"

Madame's presence at Syere was likely to add to my difficulties. To keep the peace between two angry women was a task from which any man might shrink. Why had the Count sent her? What scheme was he perfecting?

One difficulty I was quickly called upon to deal with. The officer of the escort presently came to me.

"I was instructed, Captain, to return to Dravstadt without delay."

"Very well. I have no message to send."

"I was also instructed to leave some of my men with you and take back some of yours in their place."

"Which men do you take?" I asked carelessly. I was very much alive to the fact that here was another move in some plan of which I was entirely ignorant, but I betrayed no anxiety.

"I have the list here," he answered.

I looked at the paper he handed to me. There were six names on it, all men of the Guard whom I knew, and of the four in whom I was placing special trust, three were mentioned, O'Connell being one of them.

"Do you leave old troopers of the Guard in place of these?" I asked, "or recent recruits from Varna."

"It happens that they are all men from Varna, Captain."

Thoughtfully I turned the paper in my fingers. This was no chance selection. The paper might have come from Dravstadt, but the list had been compiled in Syere,

I felt as sure of this as if I had seen the names written down. Would not the officer, in the usual course, have communicated his instructions to me when he had first arrived? Someone had given him the information he was told to get after he had entered Syere. Surely this was a plan to remove those men who could not be relied upon to betray me.

"Instead of tried men, I am to have troopers new to their duties," I said slowly.

"Is the task here so difficult?" he asked with a laugh. "In Dravstadt we are inclined to think that our comrades in Syere are making holiday."

"Evidently you have not had an opportunity of talking to my troopers," I said quietly. "I fancy they would tell you a different tale. The escort must go back as it came. I cannot spare these men."

"But the Count —"

"Generously thinks to give some other men a holiday perhaps."

"I do not think such an idea was in his mind."

"Possibly not. I have certain duties to perform and use my own judgment in the matter."

"If I may presume to advise, Captain, I —"

"Save yourself the trouble. Your advice cannot be competent since you are ignorant of the position. These men remain here. I can answer the Count when he chooses to question me."

"The men who were to be left may prove troublesome," he said.

"Are they such fools? You give me another reason

for sending them back to Dravstadt. When do you start? ”

“ I was only waiting for the exchange of men.”

“ Then there is nothing to keep you,” I answered. “ If these men prove troublesome, you may tell them that my word is law in Syere, and that swift punishment follows disobedience. There are dungeons in the castle which lack tenants.”

Whether the officer had any difficulty I do not know. When I went into the courtyard a few minutes later the escort was ready to start, and I heard no grumbling. The men saluted and rode out without a murmur, and the gate was closed again.

What effect my assertion of authority would have on the men who were with me, it was difficult to tell; it might command their respect, or convince them that my fall was a matter of a few hours. How the Count would regard my action depended on what scheme was in his mind. He might applaud it, but I thought it much more likely that he would come in haste to Syere. I would prepare for his coming as best I could, and a talk with Madame Laroux might be useful. She would have some of the news of the city, might know the Count's intentions, might even tell me something about my lady.

She received me very graciously. Gone were the effects of the journey, youth was hers again. Her woman must be clever, and it had been a long toilet, I warrant, which had produced so great a change. To her advances I made a willing response. If she had come as a spy her task should be no light one.

"I did not expect a welcome," she said, showing no resentment at the Princess's refusal to see her at once.

"It is a strange duty for me to undertake."

"It is indeed. Why did you undertake it?"

"I sacrificed myself at the Count's persuasion. It seems there are few women willing to come to Syere even for the honour of serving Her Highness. I do not wonder. It is a prison of a place without and within."

"But contains no prisoners, madame."

"I am not so sure of that," she returned. "It is a cage, and those who live in a cage, even if the bars be gilded, are prisoners. Here I do not even see any gilding, Captain Heselton."

"Bars may be a protection from enemies who are without," I said. "I believe the Princess has many, her former maids of honour amongst them."

"I know nothing of them, but I do know the Count has difficulties before him and has to scheme to meet them. While he held the sword the work was easy; diplomacy is a far more hazardous weapon to handle."

"He can always take to the sword again," I answered.

"You are terribly direct, Captain Heselton."

"I am a soldier, madame."

"And find it best to swim with the stream?"

"Is it not wise? Are you not showing the same wisdom?"

"Yes, indeed, and more promptly than you did. The rebellion was no surprise to me. I was not found in the flock of frightened women crying along the corridor. I had already retired to a place of safety."

"You had the advantage of me, madame," I said quickly. "Had I known of the rebellion, I might have helped it rather than done my utmost to hinder it."

"I wonder," she said slowly.

But it was not wonder in her eyes, it was surprise at such a definite statement. She had not expected to find me so uncompromising a supporter of the Count. Some different side of my character had been presented to her, and she found her preconceived ideas concerning me useless as a foundation upon which to build. She should not trick me if I could help it.

"Though my compliance came late, the Count has rewarded it generously," I said after a pause; "so your reward should be great, madame."

"It may be, Captain Heselton. If it be so, I shall not forget my friends."

"You may find me one of the first to remind you of that promise," I said quickly. "Was it the Count who found you a place of safety on the night of the rebellion?"

She smiled.

"You seem to understand. You would have me think you a rough soldier, but such a man does not usually read the heart of a woman."

I answered smile with smile to seem as wise as she believed me, but I was entirely at a loss to understand her meaning. Some secret she had, and I waited for her to tell it, but she was very cautious. She remained silent. I had convinced her that I was a friend, how could I wholly persuade her that any secret would be

safe with me? Since she was for the Count body and soul, so long as she received due reward, I judged she was no real friend to the Princess. I must tempt her to say a little more. So much might depend upon it in the future, that future which in a few hours might be galloping to overtake me.

"We are friends, madame; our actions make us so."

"You have given me no proof."

"Have you given me an opportunity?"

"It may come soon."

I was fencing to no purpose, so I tried another way.

"Madame, do you imagine the Count thinks of marrying the Princess?" I asked the question in a manner that suggested some doubt in my own mind, but also intimated that I should have no quarrel with the Count whatever he decided to do.

"What has he said to you?" she asked eagerly.

"Little in words. I judge by looks, by manner, indeed in a thousand ways."

She pleated a fold in her dress. I could have laughed, so great a caricature was she of innocent youth.

"A secret is no secret to him who has already guessed it," she said. "I have the very best reason for knowing that Christian of Varna will never marry the Princess Suzanne."

I was not dull-witted, but for a moment I did not grasp her meaning. Her attitude and her manner did not leave me long in doubt. Was it possible the Count had succumbed to the artificial charms of Madame Laroux?

I would have wagered such a thing absurd had any other said it, but the declaration came from Madame herself, and fully appreciating her ability to take care of herself, I could not imagine her mistaken in so personal a matter. Men have strange fancies, and the beloved mistress of one possesses little charm in the eyes of another. Providence has given some of us queer ideas of beauty, else many maids would never become wives.

“In this matter, madame, I am ever at your command,” I said, and I said it with joy and from my heart. This woman must stand between my lady and the Count, and Christian of Varna might not be altogether ill-pleased if I rode to the frontier presently with the Princess.

Madame received my promise of service with as much dignity, and with thanks as lofty, as if she were already a queen firmly seated upon her throne. It was difficult not to laugh at her, hard not to pity the Count, for indeed, she was not attractive. Even years ago when she was young she might have passed without much comment, I fancy. She was clever and the Count was far less wise than I had thought him. I did not shut my eyes to the possibility of Madame being mistaken, but even so, the Count would have an enemy who might be of immense service to me in helping the Princess. A mistake was possible, but not probable, I thought.

My rooms were at the end of the hall out of which the Princess's apartments opened; a dreary lodging, confined and ill-lighted, but its position suited me. I could see everyone who passed through the hall, and I could

watch the Princess's door when I chose. It grew dark early here, was dark when I entered now.

A quick movement startled me. The dim figure of a man was standing there. In an instant I had closed the door.

"Whoever you may be, stand where you are if you set any value on your life," I said sharply. "We'll have light to welcome so silent a visitor."

Keenly watching the dim figure, I lit a candle. For a moment the light was reflected from two points only, eyes looking steadily at me, then came the outline of the face, sharp, clear-cut, motionless.

It was Father Anthony.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH A PRIEST CONFESSES

“**A** DANGEROUS visitor,” I said. “It is well there is a light in the room to show if the corners be empty or no.”

“I grant you have cause for such an opinion of me, Captain Heselton. I am here to alter that opinion if I can.”

“You have taken a useless journey, Father Anthony.”

“I am hopeful.”

“And of course there is some scheme behind of which I am likely to remain ignorant unless by chance I discover it for myself.”

“I came alone,” he answered, “and at the gate I enquired for you. Except to make that enquiry, I have spoken to none. I was brought to this room, and have waited for you. I wished to talk with you, and I departed from Dravstadt secretly. May I be seated?”

He sat down by the table and I seated myself opposite to him. Our positions reminded me of the night we had sat facing each other at St. Cuthbert's. He should not trick me again as he had done on that occasion.

“It is I who must make confession,” he said slowly, “you who must give absolution. If my statement is

somewhat prolix, you must be patient, because, although it is easy to come to the point, the explanation is difficult. I played a treacherous part; I want to justify my action."

"Not an original desire, Father. It is the way of traitors to excuse themselves."

"Say rather of all men," he returned. "But remember, if traitors succeed they are no longer traitors, and the means they adopted are easily justified. Treachery, so called, has been the foundation of many a constitution which has grown to be the glory of the world. I failed, hence the difficulty of my explanation."

"I am listening, Father. Priests are men, and sometimes they prove to be villains."

"True. For the moment consider me a man; it will serve as a starting point even if in the end I prove myself a villain."

So much I conceded with an inclination of the head. In argument I was likely to be no match for him.

"I judge that you take little interest in the Church," he went on, "except perhaps to complain that priests, and especially in Dravstadt, play too large a part in politics. I will not argue this point, but when I maintain that religion and politics are closely knit together, and if you like I will say again in Dravstadt especially, you will at least grant that I have a point of view."

Again I nodded.

"So I have interested myself in politics," he continued, "and rightly or wrongly, believe I have a clearer understanding of them than most men. If I place the

Church first it is only natural, but I have ever had in mind the ultimate good of the country."

I did not dispute this statement. I was content to be a listener.

"I will go no further into past history than to say this, Captain Heselton: King Philip was a bad king, a sinner strongly armed, and his treatment of his niece was not only brutal but extremely foolish. Although I had no part in the efforts made to set her on the throne, my sympathies were entirely with the Princess, and I was among the first to welcome her proposed marriage to Christian of Varna. I came from the King to Syere to urge upon Her Highness the advisability of such a match, and I added my own persuasion. Her aversion to it I took to be a woman's whim, a natural opposition to anything her uncle might propose; when she saw the Count, when she understood all the advantages, she would adopt a different attitude. So I believed until she came to Dravstadt. To a large extent I was in her confidence, and knew that with the help of a maid of honour she was planning to escape this marriage. Still, I trusted to the personal attractions of the Count, and thought little of her scheming until a certain officer in the Guard opened a door into the King's garden for a serving maid."

He paused, but I think I succeeded in showing no particular interest.

"Up to that moment I knew the plot was futile, knew that among those she trusted there was not one courageous enough to take part with the Princess against

the King; now I knew that a man with courage enough had been found if only he could be persuaded to turn traitor. How easily the word comes to the tongue, Captain Heselton," he said, a smile relaxing the rigid lines of his hatchet face for a moment.

"I have no quarrel with the manner of your confession," I answered.

"I must go back a little," he said, "and do justice to the Count of Varna. There had been many to urge him to foster rebellion against King Philip, not only in his own State, but in Dravstadt. The proposed marriage was a way out of many difficulties, and when, in spite of the King's precautions, news was carried to Varna that the Princess would not consent, the Count's advisers became more insistent. Marriage or no marriage, Christian of Varna must rule in Saxe-Oldenburg. From the first I had worked for this marriage, believing it would be good for Church and State, and when failure seemed imminent, I threw my influence on the Count's side, convinced that once the rebellion was successful, the marriage would follow. I played a double part, you will say; true, but my conscience supported me."

"I envy you so convenient a conscience, Father."

"It is difficult to make you understand," he said quietly, looking as though he were harrying his brain to find language suitable to my dull comprehension. "It is very difficult. The bare facts you know. The Guard was bought, that was easy, and it was not thought that Captain Huismann's authority would prove dangerous. Your influence was feared, and from my point of view

you were an obstacle in a two-fold sense. If you did not succeed in stirring up a certain number of the men to follow you and so defeat the rebellion, you might succeed in getting the Princess out of the country. No one can have a keener appreciation of what one resolute man may do than I have."

"So far I understand," I answered.

"You do?" he queried, leaning a little towards me across the table. "You understand that it was absolutely necessary you should be got out of the way quietly, expeditiously, unless you could be induced to turn traitor? Certain men of the Guard, who were consulted, said you had a strange sense of honour which was incomprehensible to them. So long as you were got rid of the Count cared not how it was done, and I undertook the business. I was bent on giving you a chance, Captain Heselton."

"You interest me, Father. Was I so blind that I did not see the way of escape?"

"You were in disgrace," the priest went on rapidly. "I had contrived to let King Philip know that you were plotting with the Princess, or with her serving maid on her behalf. A disgraced man may easily be bargained with. I asked you to come to St. Cuthbert's, and confident that a message from me would not bring you, I baited my hook with — with a woman."

"That was clever," I said.

"I was not playing the Count's game only, but my own — really the Princess's, although I had no intention that you should see her just then. I considered



“You understand that it was absolutely necessary that you should be got out of the way quietly.” Page 158.

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she was not fully alive to her own interests and the interests of the country."

"A pretty confession of treachery, isn't it?" I said.

"And not yet complete," he returned, his beadlike eyes fixed upon me. "That night, had you given me any reason to suppose you would desert King Philip, I should have told you what was to happen and sought to bind you to the Princess's cause, her real good — this marriage; as it was —"

"You played the part of chief ruffian and did your best to murder me."

"Captain Heselton, it has ever been recognised that the individual must suffer rather than the community."

He did not lack courage, this priest. So much he had in his favour. I have some respect even for a villain who fights openly, and this Father Anthony was certainly doing now. He was in Syere, and must realise that he was in my power. How could he know that I should not take advantage of the fact and revenge myself? Yes, he had courage.

"Do you expect absolution?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"What! Is there more to tell?"

"You escaped, how I cannot imagine —"

"Good fortune, and a good sword, Father; besides, your brother ruffians were made of poor stuff."

"And I am glad you escaped, although you came within an ace of defeating the rebellion, I am told."

"First the Count, now you," I laughed; "both plotting my death, yet both delighted that I am alive. It is

a strange situation. The Count has brought me to honour, I am the Captain of his Guard; what honour do you bring me, Father Anthony?"

"None, my son, and it may be that in such emptiness there is the greater honesty."

"What! Having easily convinced me that you are a villain, would you now try and make me believe you honest?"

"I would finish the confession," he answered. "I have made a grievous mistake. The Count is not the man I supposed him to be."

"On the last occasion we sat face to face I warned you against speaking treachery, Father Anthony."

"And I give as much heed to the warning now as I did then," he replied. "I say again I have made a great mistake. Why did the Count make you Captain of the Guard, do you suppose?"

"To turn me into a friend. It may be for your good, Father, if you remember my obligation."

For all I knew he might be spying for the Count. It was necessary to be careful with such a man.

"And why did you accept his clemency?" the priest asked. "Because you feared death? I know better. Behind your oath of allegiance there was a reservation. I saw it in your eyes."

"See one other fact in my eyes if you can, Father Anthony," and I leaned towards him across the table, looking him squarely in the face. "I am a rough soldier with no skill for hair splitting in argument, and have a code of honour which reaches no very high standard it

may be; but the principles I do see are sharply drawn, definitely black and white, truth naked. That I may choose the wrong does not alter the fact, and if I do wrong, my conscience never deceives me into fancying that I am doing right. I know better. If I sin, I am a deliberate sinner, which is preferable to my thinking than a sinner who pretends to be a saint. When I take an oath I keep it so long as he or she to whom I have sworn does not by word or deed cancel it."

"It is not a bad scheme of conduct," he returned slowly and reflectively, "although I cannot uphold you for doing what you know to be wrong."

I laughed; his comment was so ready.

"I think the devil must have had a hand in teaching you, Father Anthony."

"A wise man learns where he can, my son. There's many a saint has profited by hearing the devil talk."

"Yet I warrant the devil has soiled the saintship of most of them," I said. "I'm a sinner, but at least I am no hypocrite."

"That is why I trust you sufficiently to make a confession. You will keep your oath, but under conditions — you admit so much. Then let me ask further: Why was the Princess sent back to Syere? Why were you made her gaoler? for so you are in fact if not in name. Why were her maids of honour not allowed to come with her? Have you answers to satisfy these questions?"

"Do they concern me?" I asked, believing that a show of indifference would make him speak more plainly.

"You must judge. One answer answers them all.

The Count's schemes made it necessary that certain persons should not remain in Dravstadt."

I waited and tried to look indifferent.

"He bound you by an oath of friendship because he realised your influence with the Guard. Another might buy such men as he had bought them, and you would serve to minimise the danger. But he sent you to Syere so that you might not watch him, and you brought the Princess to Syere so that she might not be in his way, so that he might dally with this proposed marriage until it suited his purpose to say that he would have none of it. Rough soldier as you call yourself, Captain Heselton, is there no question which burns on your tongue?"

"Is it certain he will not marry the Princess?" I asked.

"The people clamour for the marriage, and the Count pretends to listen, but he means to go his own way."

"And marry Madame Laroux?"

"Is that the tale she has brought to Syere? You see I know she is here, and came as lady in waiting. She is another person the Count has sent out of his way. She was useful to him while the rebellion was being planned, and he has fooled her to the top of her bent, until she is convinced he is in love with her. Well, Captain, is there no question which burns on your tongue?"

"I suppose you would have me understand that since the Count will not marry the Princess, she must be a danger to him."

"Safety for her is only to be found across the frontier. Are you man enough to carry her there?"

"We go rather fast, Father Anthony. You have given me little cause to put any faith in your word."

He laid his long, thin hand suddenly on my arm.

"You have not yet asked the question which I thought must burn to be uttered. I will ask it for you, and answer it, too. For the possession of what woman does the Count scheme? Just a serving maid, Captain Heselton, for whom a door was once opened into the King's garden."

A little while since Madame Laroux had quieted my fears. Where her own interests were concerned she was a woman not easily deceived. I had left her, laughing to myself at the Count's folly; this priest was showing me the Count's subtlety, and his was the more likely story. I had myself well under control, but Father Anthony was far too keen not to know that his shaft had gone home; his only doubt could be how deep it had struck.

"And what says the woman?" I asked.

The question seemed to puzzle him.

"I am not in her confidence," he said slowly, "but I think she had no great liking for the Count's wooing. Perchance she feared her mistress, or may be she chooses to be won with difficulty so that she may forge the stronger bonds, or perhaps the Count has a rival."

"Is this maid of honour still in Dravstadt?"

"She has contrived to hide herself from the Count, and he is furious."

"Where is she?" I asked, my hand gripping his wrist so fiercely that he winced.

"I do not know."

"What scheme is behind this confession of yours?"

"The safety of the Princess, no more, no less; and in her escape this maid of honour might help us much. I ask you, Captain Heselton: Where is she?"

He believed me as little as I believed him, and in this mutual distrust I think conviction came to each of us that the other was speaking the truth. I got up quickly.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Find her."

"How?"

"Heavens, man, how can I tell? Use my wit, and play with chance; be a hypocrite and help the Count. Search every corner in Dravstadt and shut every road of escape. Then if we find her —"

"Yes; then?"

I laughed as a desperate man will sometimes when his soul is on fire.

"You're a priest and should have naught to do with passions let loose. The Count is a man, so am I. What should come when two men love the same maid? Wander into the forest, Father Anthony, and watch two brutes furious for possession. They will answer the question for you."

"You will go to Dravstadt?"

"Further, much further — to the world's end if this lady be gone thither."

He still looked puzzled as though I were acting contrary to his expectations, and were falsifying the estimate he had made of my character; or was he still play-

ing a villainous part? Had he come to Syere expecting to find my lady hidden there? Had he hoped to surprise the secret out of me? It was possible, he was not to be trusted; he might be the Count's emissary, or he might be playing some deep game of his own. Some scheme was in his brain, but I was convinced of one thing — he did not know where my lady was.

“Have I your leave to visit the Princess?” he asked.

“Visit whom you will, but take a warning, Father Anthony. Play no tricks against my authority, or by heaven you shall suffer for it. This is the Castle of Syere, not the Monastery of St. Cuthbert.”

“You were right, Captain Heselton, you are a rough soldier, but I do not complain. We shall help each other, and the Princess; between us perchance we shall find this maid of honour.”

I believe he thought she was hidden in the castle. I let him go to the Princess and gave him no further thought. I could only think of my lady and plan how I might help her. Where was she? Where had she hidden herself so successfully? Surely somewhere in Dravstadt. If she had left the city would she not have come to Syere? Had she thought of me? Had she longed for my help? Perhaps in her desperation she had gone to the Ange-Gardien tavern again to enquire for me. This idea came suddenly when for an hour or more I had been planning what I might do. It came flashing into my chaotic mind as lightning into a dark night, making everything clear for a moment. She might well ask for me again, thinking I should contrive

to send her some message, and the tavern would serve as a good starting point from which to commence my search for her. To-night. Why not to-night? The moon was at the full, its light fell in a pale splash upon the wall of my room, but what enemy was I likely to meet upon the road? Why should I not ride to Dravstadt to-night?

For a moment all the difficulties I must encounter seemed to present themselves in a mighty phalanx to overwhelm me; but the next moment a way to meet the immediate ones came to me, and for the rest my wits must serve as the need arose. I went quickly to the door and then paused. Was I justified in leaving the Princess? I should return, no doubt I should return, and soon. Decision to act seemed to bring with it a promise of speedy success. Was I not bound to my lady before all others? I cannot tell whether I was quite convinced, but I passed out of the room and sent for O'Connell.

I bade him see that no one entered my rooms, and when the guard was changed he was to pass on these instructions.

"Say I am particularly engaged and must not be disturbed. Do you understand?"

"That you will not be there, yes."

"Keep that knowledge to yourself, O'Connell. I have that to do to-night which may mean life or death."

I told him no more. He would feel that he was in my confidence, and so far could be trusted, I thought, but I dared not tell him I was leaving Syere. Some excuse I

must give to the sentry at the gate for riding out at such an hour; I would frame some tale as I crossed the courtyard. The more curt and spontaneous it was, the less cause for suspicion would there be in it. The circumstances must suggest the action. To-night at any rate I was no believer in overmuch detail.

The thought of the moment was acted upon at the outset. On the chief staircase I might meet someone who would delay me; I was in a fever to be started on my journey, so I took the narrow stair and went down quickly, making little noise. I glanced at the door upon the landing, remembering the kitchen wench, and even as I did so, it opened.

“Captain Heselton!”

A woman peeped from the opening, a serving maid by her dress, but not the child who said she slept there.

“You once opened a door for me,” she whispered, “now it is I who open one for you. Come.”

CHAPTER XV

THE NIGHT OF THE FULL MOON

IN the sudden joy of knowing that my lady was beside me I forgot to wonder how it was she came to be here. I forgot many things, the journey upon which I was starting a moment ago, the fact that I was Captain of the Guard, that these walls about me were the walls of Syere. I was only a man with the maid of his desire, and the grim world was changed into an enchanted land where was only the light of love, the fragrance of love's flowers, only love's music whispering through the dim, secluded shades fashioned for lovers to wander in. Yet was I more lover than man, a fearful lover, trembling lest his dreams prove mere phantasy, doomed to pass in a moment; a lover wholly unskilled in his profession, whose heartbeats were strangely like a coward's, who was as tongue-tied as a boy new to the dame's school where he shall learn his letters presently. For all the joy that was in my soul, I had no word to make it articulate. I passed through the doorway as my lady bid me, and when she had closed it, I followed her; indeed, she had taken my hand to guide me, for the way was dark and with many a turn in it. She did not command me to walk silently, but I went as though the

slightest sound would bring disaster, would awaken me from my sleep and banish this precious moment for ever.

"There are stairs," she whispered. "No one will follow us."

She held my hand no longer, but went lightly on in front of me, up a twisting stairway and then through a narrow door on to the leaden roof of a tower, round and battlemented, and with a curious sense of isolation from the rest of the castle.

We were in the pale splendour of the full moon, alone in a world of fancy, midway 'twixt earth and heaven. Below us was the silent forest, not a breath stirring in the tree tops; above, the silent sky with only a star here and there bright enough to share sovereignty with the moon; yet, heaven and earth were full of the sound of song to me, melodies which only the heart could hear and understand, holy voices, a soul's communion.

"The legends of the castle speak of this tower," said my lady, "and for many it exists only in legend. Few know the way to it, and fewer still would venture to climb those stairs. Here dwells the phantom of Syere, they say, ghostly president of all those unhappy souls who have suffered within its walls."

"Some happy souls have been here," I said. It was a feeble whisper of the joy that was in me.

"If so, they have left no record behind them. Short histories of misery you may find scratched in many of the dungeons."

"There is a happiness which has no words to proclaim its existence, mademoiselle."

She did not answer, and I could not tell whether she understood my meaning.

"Before, when the Princess was a prisoner here, she often came to the top of this tower," she said after a pause. "I think it pleased her to stand for a little while above the world, above its grimness and injustice, and dream. Look, Captain Heselton, how the walls go down, rugged and uncut, like steps which some bold climber might venture."

She drew me to the battlements and pointed to the rounded walls below. Roughly hewn masonry crowned the face of the rock which here was jagged and uneven. Fancy might see steps up which to climb, but reality would never succeed in finding them.

"Only birds could hope for any footing there," I said.

"Yet I have known the Princess stand here looking at the face of that rock, sometimes when the sun was high at noonday, sometimes on just such a night as this. I think it was in her mind to make her escape some day by that road."

"It would have been certain death," I said, glancing down. The very thought of such a descent was horrible.

"Death would be freedom," my lady answered.

Death was so alien to this realm of love and mystery, such a discord dropped suddenly into a perfect sequence of harmonies, that the thought of it brought back to my memory something of all I had forgotten. I realised how long a time had passed since I last stood beside my lady. I remembered some of the happenings in that

interval, and knew myself for a changed man in soul and in condition. Into my heart it was unlikely she could see, but my condition was plain enough. I was the Count's man, the Captain of his Guard, surely a traitor in my lady's eyes. She stood before me wrapped in a hideous cloak and roughly shod, just as she had come into the barrack yard that day, but it was not so that I saw her. Nothing could hide her from me as she really was, my lady clad in gray, perfect as was the night; and concealed in my tunic was her little gray shoe. Into her eyes the moonlight shone, giving them a beauty beyond this world, it seemed to me, and I saw there questions which I might find difficult to answer.

"The Princess is a prisoner no longer," I said.

"Is she not? I warrant at this moment there are sentries at the gate and watchmen on the towers; and there is a captain over them who is Count Christian's trusted friend."

"Not so trusted, mademoiselle, as you may suppose. It is difficult to make you understand. I was offered —"

"I know," she said; "choice between life and death. It was natural to choose life."

"But difficult, though life was dear to me."

"And the price of it?"

"Is not yet paid, nor can I tell how great it may be," I said eagerly, growing courageous. "Life was dear to me because some day I might give it willingly to save a woman."

"A Princess?"

"If you will, mademoiselle — a Princess."

She was silent, was probably full of doubt concerning me; I must make her understand.

"If you have thought of me at all, mademoiselle, they must have been hard thoughts."

"Some of them," she answered, "but I heard how the King died, and that a brave man lay dying from the wounds he had in attempting to save him. I did not hear this at first, not until I had been to the Ange-Gardien tavern again. I had no hard thoughts then."

"But afterwards?" I asked, almost as though I were a criminal dreading to hear the truth.

"I wondered and waited and — and so we come to to-night. What journey were you on when I opened the door?"

"I was going back to Dravstadt."

"Why?"

"To seek for a woman I thought was in hiding there, and in danger. She might be waiting for my coming."

"Would she believe that you would desert the Princess?"

"I know not what she thinks of me, nor can she know all that may lie deeply buried in the heart of a man. Tell me, mademoiselle, how came you to Syere?"

"Let me keep that secret."

"As Captain —"

She interrupted me quickly.

"There is no one, I swear, who merits punishment for his carelessness. All your watchmen and sentries were powerless to keep me out. There are more ways into

Syere than a loud demand for the opening of the gate. Think, if you will, that I had temerity enough to venture those steps on the rock yonder, only let me keep my secret."

"Keep it, mademoiselle; it may be of some service presently. By the way you came in, others may go out."

"You would help the Princess, Captain Heselton?" she said eagerly.

From the moment she had called me as I went down the narrow stairs, I think I was conscious that the parting of the ways had come, that I must declare myself definitely friend or enemy of the Count; yet how could I act without understanding the true position of affairs?

"I know not what to say, nor whom to trust, nor whether Her Highness is in any real danger," I answered. "The Count gave her into my keeping as one dear to him. Then a villain of a page, even as we journeyed to Syere, set me doubting whether the Count were honest, and spoke of his own conquests so complacently that I marvel I restrained myself from knocking him out of his saddle."

"The folly of a page was surely hardly worth your anger," she said.

"This morning comes Madame Laroux to the castle, and it seems she believes the Count will marry her. I care nothing about this French woman, but I know enough of her to be sure that she is not easily to be deceived."

"Is it likely he would make her Queen?"

"It is impossible to tell what strange fancy a man may get when he chooses a wife."

"I think she was sent to Syere to find out if a certain maid of honour were here," said my lady.

"And then comes Father Anthony with a tale — mademoiselle, did you know the priest had come?"

"Yes. He has been with the Princess, but he has not seen me. I was told what he said by the little maid who would not let you see where she slept because she would not bring you to my hiding place. I think Father Anthony also thought to find me at Syere, but for a while the Princess keeps my secret."

"I would not trust him even if he swore by his profession," I said.

"He may be honest in his way. He told the Princess he had left Captain Heselton strangely angry at his tale, and that he feared you might venture to Dravstadt. It was not chance that brought me to that door to-night. I was watching, and the little maid watched near the foot of the other stairs. Had you gone that way she would have brought you to me."

"Do you trust this priest?"

"No; nor can I tell what is in his mind, whether he is wholly for the Count, or whether he has some interest in the welfare of the Princess."

"It is his own game he plays, mademoiselle, whatever else is doubtful, that is certain."

"Perhaps you do him an injustice. At least part of his story is true."

"You mean —"

"That the Count desires the maid of honour more than the mistress — yes."

The madness of jealousy was mine. I could have cried out in my rage and helplessness. What strength had I to match against Christian of Varna? Where was the woman who would not be tempted by all he could offer her?

"And I think, Captain Heselton, the maid hates him even more than her mistress does," she said quietly.

I took one step towards her. I hardly know what I meant to do. Madness was still in me, but at that moment it seemed the world contained but one man and one woman and that nothing could part them.

"The hour of need comes fast," she said. "Almost you gave me your promise that night in the palace of Dravstadt. Will you help the Princess to safety, Captain Heselton?"

"And her maid?" I asked in a whisper.

"She must go, too."

Had she not promised me in the round room that night that the man who served her in this matter might presently ask her anything?

"I will do all that a man can to carry Her Highness across the frontier," I answered.

"It must be done quickly."

"We will go by the way you came, mademoiselle."

"That is impossible."

"Tell me the secret, and let me judge. Will you not trust me?"

"I trust you, but that way is impossible. You must contrive some other road of escape."

"Is the Princess prepared to go at any moment?"

"You must persuade her."

"Persuade! Good heavens, is she so uncertain of herself that she knows not whether she will go or stay? I have no great longing to risk my life for such a woman."

"You must not tell her so."

"I am likely to say it if her whims threaten to ruin our plans. You had best warn her, mademoiselle. It is not only her safety I have to think of."

"She may not listen to me very willingly," she said. "I am a little out of her favour."

"I have noted it. She would not let me speak of you. Why? Could woman have served her better than you have done?"

"You have not guessed the reason?" she asked.

"No, I —" and then I stopped. I was suddenly surprised by the tone in which she asked the question.

"I do not know what you have said to her," she went on slowly, "but I think she had no desire that her maid should have any share in her interviews with the Captain of the Guard."

"Why, mademoiselle, I —"

"I do not know what you have said to her," she repeated.

"You mean she has thought of me — me? a rough soldier — a Captain of Horse and a Princess? You jest, mademoiselle."

"Women, like men, may have strange fancies, Captain Heselton."

I moved quickly. I was close to her. I did not touch her, but I bent towards her and spoke in a whisper.

"There is only one woman in all the world. She came suddenly, and I knew that for ever, night and day, she alone would live in my heart. She might laugh at me, or be so out of my reach that I might as wisely sigh for the moon yonder as hope to be dear to her, but for all this I must be her bondman to the end. I had grown to hate all women, it matters not why, but for her sake I became more gentle. I have lived through anxious hours because of her. To-night I would have ridden to Dravstadt because of her. She was in danger, and nothing on earth could keep me from going to her. She might laugh at my coming; she might scorn my aid; she might show me some man who was all the world to her, and call me fool; yet she is powerless to take her image out of my heart. You may guess what manner of talk mine has been with the Princess."

I think she tried to stop me, to interrupt my quick torrent of words, but I persisted, and when I paused she was silent.

"I will serve the Princess, mademoiselle. You must go to her and bid her be ready. She must be ready to go at a moment's notice. And you, mademoiselle, keep still in hiding. The men of the Guard spy upon me; neither Madame Laroux nor Father Anthony is to be trusted. Do not show yourself, nor let them know you

are at Syere. I will contrive a plan of escape for the Princess and for you."

"She must believe that it is for her, or —"

"I care not what she believes so that she comes at once when I am ready. If at the last moment she refuses —"

"Yes. How then, Captain Heselton?"

"You must come alone," I answered.

"I could not leave her. Think, think what it might mean. The Count — Ah, it might mean death to her!"

"And perchance worse than death to you," I answered.

"I will not go alone."

"There can be no turning back when the plan is complete. If the Princess will not come, be sure she will save herself some other way. I would not swear that she hates the Count so much, and she may easily contrive to make him love her. If she will stay in Syere she must. You will come."

"No."

"You shall."

We stood face to face, her will and mine in conflict.

"Mademoiselle, say you will come. God knows, I would give my life for you."

She spoke suddenly, sharply, but in a whisper.

"Look, Captain Heselton! Look! Behind you."

My back was towards the narrow doorway which opened on to the roof. Low down, against the blackness of it, the moonlight just touched a pale face. Superstition might easily have imagined that some phantom of

the castle was there. The man was crouching on the upper steps so that he could just see over the threshold and watch us. He was probably unconscious that the moonlight touched him, and he was unprepared for sudden attack. I sprang to the doorway and had him by the collar. It was the seneschal, the last man in all Syere I would have know of my lady's presence in the castle. For a moment I meditated whether I should fling him over the battlements — it is certain that I lived to regret that I had not done so — and perhaps it was only the presence of my lady that saved him. I must deal with him in another fashion which should keep him silent, and I went down the stairs dragging him with me.

CHAPTER XVI

DREAMS AND REALITIES

IT was a rough journey for the seneschal. I went down the stairs rapidly, and in his futile efforts to gain his feet he slipped from stair to stair much as a heavy but loosely filled sack might do. He had given a low cry when I seized him, whether of fear or malice was doubtful, but he uttered no further sound. Perhaps he was stunned, I did not trouble to look. I said nothing to my lady, nor did she speak, but I knew she was following us. I have an unerring sense for finding my way once I have travelled a road, and I needed no guiding hand along the passages this time. At some point, possibly at a place where the wall was recessed, my lady slipped past us, and it was she who opened the door.

“Don’t kill,” she whispered.

I did not answer, perhaps because I had not yet determined what to do, but dragged my victim on to the landing, and as the door was closed again, pulled him down the stairway, shouting for O’Connell as I went. I would not kill, but the seneschal should repent that he had played the spy.

Evidently German Max was sentry somewhere about

the hall, for my shouting brought him to the foot of the stairs, and a moment later came O'Connell.

"A spy, prettily trapped, and the penalty to pay," I said. "Let him have the night in a dungeon to say his prayers."

O'Connell said nothing as he dragged the seneschal to his feet, but Max gave a guttural laugh as he caught him roughly by the arm. The seneschal's discomfiture seemed to please the German mightily.

"Shut a stout door on him. We'll deal with his business in the morning."

I watched them disappear through the doorway which led to the dungeons, and then I went to my quarters.

The moonlight was no longer on the wall, and the lamp I lighted only served to proclaim what a dismal lodging mine was, yet to-night, for the first time, I was unconscious of it. I knew that moonlight still flooded a silent world with love and mystery. I knew that my lady was near me, and I knew — yes, I think I was sure that I must be a little in her thoughts. I had spoken but a tithe of all that was in my heart, shown her but the reflection of the lambent flames which burned there, yet she had understood. Could any woman fail to understand? And she might have silenced me; one word, a movement to widen the space between us, a single gesture would have done it; but she had listened. Another moment and her heart might have whispered an answer; I might have held her in my arms, had not this spy come upon us. She hated the Count, hated him; all he could offer was no temptation to her, and the knowledge was

like a song in my soul. For a long while this song was all that I was conscious of. My brain refused to think of to-morrow or to make plans for it, refused to realise any of all those dangers and difficulties which beset us. Not yet could I remember that I was Captain of the Guard, that the walls of Syere were about me, that watchmen were upon the towers, sentries at the gate, and that every single man might prove a hindrance to our escape. Love shut out the grim world for a space. Thank God, it is a way with love to blunt the thorns upon the path, and set strong courage in the heart so that a man may not shrink from the perilous journey he may have to travel.

Presently I became conscious of all there was to be accomplished. I saw the perilous path stretching out before me until it was lost in the dim distance of uncertainty. The end I could not see, nor could I conjecture what was to happen upon the way; I only knew that the path must be trodden and that love gave promise of help. I must contrive a way of escape, my lady had said so, and as she said it I had thought of the little kitchen maid. The child had a secret and would tell it in the interests of her mistress. Would it serve our purpose? Now, as I thought how likely it was she had magnified a very small secret into a great one, I realised how slender a thread this was on which to trust, how desperate a chance it was. And then another scheme took shape and was suddenly complete in my mind in every particular. The Princess was not a prisoner. I had urged her to ride, had promised to be her only escort; it was

a pity she had not done so, it would have made my plan easier. Still, it was simple enough as it was. The Princess must ride, Madame Laroux with her, and for escort myself and another, some man of Varna who might be suspicious and should learn how groundless his suspicions were. We would ride out and return. The next day we would ride again, Madame Laroux with us if she wished, and this time a serving maid should go as well, one whose spirits wanted rousing since the walls of Syere had depressed them — just a kindly thought of the mistress to give the girl an hour's enjoyment and help to restore her health. Perhaps three might form the escort on this occasion, O'Connell and another with me. But we should not return as we set out. Madame Laroux might do as she would, go to the frontier with us or ride back to Syere. O'Connell would stand by me I was convinced, and the other — he must take his life on my terms or lose it. The choice would rest with him. It was a simple plan, there was only one thing which menaced it, my refusal to exchange the men mentioned in the list brought to me by the officer. Should my refusal bring the Count in hot haste to Syere, there would be no time for my scheme; but would he come in such a hurry? Not while he was kept busy in Dravstadt looking for a hiding maid of honour. I judged him to be a man who would let nothing interfere with his pursuit of a woman.

Daylight must have been showing in the east when I threw myself dressed upon my bed, my hand inside my tunic touching the little shoe.

It was late when I awoke, and for the first time I missed being on the tower at dawn to look towards Dravstadt. Why should I turn towards the city any more? My lady was not there, but here — here in Syere. Yet strangely, it was the first time I had experienced depression in the morning. Last night my difficulties had shrunk into insignificance, but while I slept they had grown — tares in my field. I remembered that Madame Laroux was here to spy, that Father Anthony was here to play his own game, whatever it might be, that nearly every man in the Guard was watching my actions. The morning had brought all my difficulties into horrible prominence. One thing was of paramount importance, no one must know of my lady's presence in Syere. I must take special precautions that this news was not carried to the Count in Dravstadt; and I gave instructions that no one was to leave the castle on any pretence whatever without my written authority.

"Do you know that Father Anthony is here, Captain?" asked one of my officers.

"Yes. When he wishes to leave he must have my permission as any other," I answered.

It was chiefly to make sure of Father Anthony that I had given these instructions.

I had told my lady that I had no time to waste in persuasion, but I went to the Princess presently. I would judge her attitude for myself. That she had any thought of me beyond how she might best use me for her own ends, I did not believe. My lady was mistaken in this, if indeed she really thought it. Was it not a

woman's way to say such things to a man that she might know more certainly what was in his heart? I experienced keen satisfaction in the thought.

The Princess had received Madame Laroux that morning, and I judged the lady in waiting had been tactful, and shown no resentment at her scornful reception, for Her Highness was in great good humour. Hers was a character of many facets, she seemed to turn a different one to me each time I saw her.

"I have seen the new spy, Captain Heselton. I think she is over old for the part. I do not wonder she could not persuade my uncle to marry her."

"Nor I, Princess."

"And as a spy I fancy she will prove a failure, Captain Heselton."

"So do I, Princess," I answered. "We will give her little opportunity. In a few hours we take the road to the frontier."

"You have decided?"

"Yes, it is necessary. You have seen Father Anthony?"

"I have, and never did I find him more dull. His conversation was as dismal as muddy water running in a gutter. He could talk of nothing but a maid of honour."

"A man to beware of, Princess, as you must know. Whisper not the smallest secret you have to him or you will regret it."

"Would you teach a woman how to judge character?" she asked with a smile.

"I am remembering that once you trusted him and he deceived you."

"Not I, Captain Heselton, it was my maid of honour who trusted him. What is your plan of escape?"

I told her of the first day's ride and the return.

"I have no desire for Madame Laroux's company," she said.

"Princess, it is important she should go. This first day's ride is designed to allay suspicion. You are destined I trust to have little of Madame Laroux's company; cannot you pretend to like her for a few hours?"

"Easily," she said, and then added a little bitterly: "Circumstances have made me an adept in deceit."

"We are going to change those circumstances."

"And after the first day's ride, Captain Heselton?"

"We ride again, Princess, but we shall not return. If all happens as I shall plan it, we shall be well on our way to the frontier before the castle has news of our flight."

"And Madame Laroux?" she asked.

"She may ride with us to the end of our journey or back to Syere as she pleases. We shall waste little time in courtesy when we ride for the second time."

"We shall be the same company on the second occasion?" she asked.

"Another trooper will go with us," I answered, "and a serving maid. Your Highness, out of the goodness of your heart, wishes to give the girl an hour's pleasure. The walls of Syere have got upon her nerves. So you

may tell Madame Laroux, and so you will have someone to attend you on your journey to the frontier."

"You were surprised to find my maid of honour here, Captain Heselton?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a little while and I thought of all my lady had said.

"It is a clever plan," she said slowly, "but we can hardly expect it to be as simple as it seems."

"I am prepared for little difficulties," I answered; "and for the big ones, if they arise, we must meet them as best we can. Will you be ready to ride to-morrow, Princess?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"And you will seem to make your peace with Madame Laroux?"

"Trust me. I shall deceive her easily. And the serving maid, Captain Heselton?"

She seemed as anxious to make me talk of her now as she had once been to hear nothing about her.

"We will plan our second ride after the first is accomplished," I returned.

"And I will hold my thanks until we have safely crossed the frontier," she said. "Misfortune has so constantly been mine that I fear to hope for success."

"Fear nothing, Princess, that is the way success is won."

She might lack courage and so add another danger to the enterprise, but at least there had been no need to use much persuasion. I laughed at my lady's insinuation

that only my petitioning would prove effective, yet loved her the more for making it. Surely a woman does not talk so to a man who has had no place in her thoughts? and I dared to wonder whether I had been as constantly in hers as she had been in mine.

I went to my room and sent for O'Connell and Max. Something must be done with regard to the seneschal. He had had many hours for reflection and might think it wise to answer questions.

"I thought you had forgotten him, Captain," said O'Connell. "His stomach will be whispering for its breakfast by this time."

I laughed. I felt no interest in the seneschal's appetite.

"Why talk of it?" said Max. "Won't he hang just as well empty as full?"

"You think hanging the best thing for him?" I asked.

"What else?" the German returned.

"He might be more useful alive," I suggested.

"I doubt it. When I see a man of his kind I always want to hang him and have done with it."

"You're a bloodthirsty fellow, Max. We'll talk to the seneschal before we decide what to do with him. You have said nothing about him to others, nothing at all about last night?"

"Nothing," answered the German.

"Nor you, O'Connell?"

"I wouldn't soil my tongue with the mention of him, Captain."

O'Connell had the key, and the three of us descended

to the dungeons. They had done their work thoroughly. At the bottom of the first steps O'Connell stopped to light a horn lantern.

"You put him below?" I asked. "One of these dungeons with some light in it would have been sufficient."

"It was night, what would he want with a light?" Max growled. "Besides, Captain, didn't you think he might wish to say his prayers? He could pray better in the dark."

O'Connell led the way down those winding steps which seemed to suggest hopelessness for any prisoner who descended them, and I felt some pity for the seneschal, little reason as I had to love him.

"It's a devil of a place this," said O'Connell. "I shouldn't wonder if some of the prisoners have reached their dungeons after breaking their necks on the way."

"Anyway, Captain, it's not worth risking the neck of a good man by sending him down here to carry food to a prisoner," said Max.

"When they once got down here I expect they mostly lived without food," said O'Connell. "Poor devils, I doubt if there's a crime in the world big enough to merit a death of this kind."

"Hang him and have done with it," said the German. "A bit of rope is easily come by, and I warrant we can find a staple somewhere in these old walls strong enough to bear so lean a burden as this fellow. Say the word, Captain, and I'll make shift to play the executioner. I'll make no greater bungle of it than others have done."

Certainly the seneschal must be kept a prisoner until the Princess was safely out of Syere, but I would have him moved to a lighter dungeon than any of these horrible holes.

O'Connell had the key, but as he put it into the lock, the door yielded and swung inwards. The dim light was sufficient to illumine the four walls and to show that the place was empty. The seneschal had gone.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SENESCHAL OF SYERE

MAX ripped out an oath as savage as the snarl of a wild beast robbed of its prey, while O'Connell whispered the name of some obscure Irish saints as though he were supplicating protection against a banshee. I might have sworn or called upon saints to beat them both had I not realised how necessary it was to be careful in action and word.

"Sure it's the right dungeon?" I asked.

The German, hearing no note of sarcasm in the question, looked to right and left of him as though a mistake might have been made; O'Connell raised the lantern a little that he might study my face more closely.

"There will be no hanging," I said; "not of the seneschal at any rate."

"He must be in the castle," Max growled. "I swear —"

"Save your wind, man. Swearing won't lock him in there again, and I think we may spare ourselves the trouble of searching the castle. Light the way to the stairs, O'Connell. We must discover who it is who is so good a friend to the seneschal. He may find it diffi-

cult to answer the questions which the Count is likely to ask him presently."

It was wisdom to assume a certain callousness. My enemies must not think me too concerned, nor imagine they had succeeded in wrecking some scheme of mine. I realised the danger only too well. The seneschal had not been released from the dungeon to remain concealed in the castle. Some time during the night the gate had opened for him, and by now no doubt the Count knew that the woman for whom he was hunting in Dravstadt was hidden at Syere. A few hours and Christian of Varna would come galloping down the winding road. How was I to receive him? It was a question to which I had not ready answer. Here was a contingency for which I had not bargained, which I was unprepared to meet, and the sudden danger left me for a while barren of all ideas. Out of the chaos of my mind came the definite desire to see my lady and tell her what had happened, that my scheme was futile. She had been so much in my thoughts that I forgot my plan had been evolved since parting with her last night, that she could have no knowledge of it unless the Princess had told her. How was I to see her? I must find the little kitchen maid and send a message, but first I would talk to the child. There was her secret; it might be worthless, but it might mean salvation.

Fortune, which had treated me so ill in one way, favoured me in another. I met the child in a passage leading towards the kitchen quarters from the entrance hall. She showed no surprise, no fear, and when I told

her to follow me she did so without question. We came to my room, no one seeing us, and I closed the door softly.

"I have kept my promise," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Yet I have seen the place where you said you slept."

"Yes, sir, my mistress has told me. I was watching for you when you came just now."

"You have a message for me?" I asked.

"Two," she answered. "Don't kill, and to-morrow you must tell my mistress your plan."

"It must be to-night."

"No," she said with that same curious directness which she had used before, "to-morrow. Whatever you may do to me you cannot make me disobey her."

"You are fond of your mistress?"

"Yes."

"And would do anything for her?"

"Anything."

"And you have said you trust me."

She nodded. It may be that a nod instead of a word marked a different degree of trust in her mind. I felt this child required special treatment, that in some measure she must be taken into my confidence, or she would not have sufficient faith in me to speak plainly.

"Your mistress is in danger. Do you know that?"

"It is not possible for anyone to be safe in the castle of Syere."

"It may be necessary for your mistress to leave it suddenly and without anyone seeing her," I said.

"This secret of yours, have you told it to your mistress?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The girl hesitated a moment.

"I was afraid; not of her, but because I knew I should lose her."

"How long have you had this secret?"

"A long time, more than two years."

"And you have never told her?"

"She has only been my mistress a few days, only since she came to the castle."

"But she was here before that, in attendance upon the Princess."

"I was not here then," she answered. "I used to be at Syere, but left. I came back after Her Highness had gone to Dravstadt."

"This secret might help your mistress."

"It would."

"Then —"

"Oh, it isn't likely you would understand, sir," she said quickly.

There was a curious lack of youth in her face as she turned her lustreless eyes to me; she was like a little old woman prematurely aged, and soured by the world's unkindness beyond all sweetening.

"Try me," I answered.

"How can you understand? You have not been without a single friend, harshly spoken to, ill-treated, struck sometimes, and then suddenly found one to love

as I found my mistress. She is a great lady, I am only her little servant; she does not know how I love her; she would go and never think of me again. She would go far away where I could not see her. But if — if when there is no one else to help her, I can; if I could save her, she could not forget me then. That is why I have kept my secret."

"Child, I do understand. I have been as friendless as you, almost as hardly dealt with, and I, too, found one to love when I saw your mistress."

"She has talked of you," she answered.

I was tempted to ask her what my lady had said, but did not. I must know this secret which might be so useful presently.

"Listen, child," I went on eagerly. "Your mistress wants to hear my plan to-morrow, she expects me to save her, and I am almost powerless. I had made a plan, a good one, but it is no use now. Things have happened to ruin it. Do you know what occurred last night?"

"You saw my mistress."

"Yes, and we were seen. The seneschal —"

The girl started, a sudden excitement in her face.

"Is it the seneschal who has ruined your plans?"

"Yes, and will ruin your mistress unless — unless I can find a way to carry her into safety."

I was a little excited, too. For a moment I forgot to what a slender chance I was trusting; all my hope seemed to be concentrated in the knowledge of this kitchen maid.

"I will tell you," she said quietly, "and some day

you must kill the seneschal for me. I want him to be a long time dying, so that he may pray for death which shall come — Oh, so slowly.”

She drew one hand over the other to show how slowly she would have death come. Such vindictiveness in one so young was horrible. Fate seemed to speak through the child, decreeing inexorable destiny. I think the seneschal would have shuddered had he heard her.

“He was a woodman, my father,” she went on, almost as though she were reading from some script set before her mental vision. “Once he was as strong as you. I never knew my mother, so we were more to each other than fathers and daughters often are. He came often to the castle, bringing wood, and he used to say the seneschal cheated him, but what could he do? There came a day when he found the seneschal in the woods; a young girl was with him, tied to a tree, and he was lashing her with a whip. My father was foolish; he should have killed him, he only thrashed him, and before night my father was caught in the forest and brought to the castle. You know the dungeons?”

“Yes.”

“Those which have no light, deep, deep down in the rock?”

“I know them.”

“There the seneschal put my father, chaining him to the wall, and when it pleased him he went and lashed him with a whip. I know not how my father lived, for little food was given to him, only just enough to make death a long time coming. Once he was strong, but —”

Her hands were suddenly clasped before her face, and I put my hand gently on her shoulder. The touch of sympathy was better than any words I could have spoken.

"Then a soldier fetched me to the castle," she went on. "He is here now, they call him Max."

"I know him."

"I think he knew what the seneschal did to my father; they were friends and drank together; perhaps the others in the castle did not know, may have thought my father had gone."

This was a new light on German Max, and here no doubt was the explanation of the seneschal's escape.

"I was set to work in the kitchen, and the seneschal told me he would kill my father at once if I ever talked about him. I was allowed to see my father for an hour once a day, but he could not see me, not because of the dark, I took a lantern with me, but because his eyes were dark. He was blind. The whip lash, sir."

"What devilish work!" I exclaimed, and the child seemed to rejoice at the anger in my voice.

"It made my father more miserable to know I was in Syere, and he hated that I should see him as he was; that was why the seneschal had me brought to the castle. He was strong no longer, could hardly lift up his hands; and sometimes he did not want me to be near him and told me to go away. He didn't mean it. He didn't know what he was saying. His mind was growing dark, too. He began to call me by my mother's name, talked to me as if I were my mother, talked to her as he must

have done before I was born. Sometimes when he told me to go, he would listen, and if I did not obey he was angry."

"You poor child!"

"I wasn't a child any more," she said quickly. "I used to grope along those passages, thinking, wondering what I could do, wondering how I might kill the seneschal. One day I lost my way, but I was not afraid. I went on and on, turning this way and that, until there was suddenly a thin line of light like a straight crack across the darkness, and I was treading on leaves. It was daylight showing under a small door and the wind had blown leaves under it."

"Could you find that door again?" I asked, leaning eagerly towards her.

"Blindfold. I went to it often afterwards so that I might know every turn in the passages. Father should escape that way, I told myself. But I must free his hands from the chains first. I stole a file, and I filed a little every day. My father did not really understand, he thought it was some game I played."

"But the key of the door?"

"We should have to break it open, I thought, and I wondered whether I should be strong enough. I knew father would not be able to do it. Then a wonderful thing happened. The seneschal rode to Dravstadt and I was set to clean his rooms. I found a key there, one key with a chain to it. I was always thinking of a key, and this one looked important. I put it in my pocket. That day I tried it in the door, and it

turned easily. I was looking down a green slope into the forest."

"You kept that key?"

"I dared not. I put it back where I found it in the seneschal's room, but I told my father, and I got wax and made an impression of it. If I could have unchained my father we might have gone that day. Then the seneschal returned and sent for me. I thought it was about the key, but it was to tell me that my father could go. I do not know why he let him go. All he said was that he had better die outside the castle than in it. Perhaps he was afraid of someone, or perhaps some of the soldiers found out about my father and made the seneschal release him. I only know that one morning his chains were unfastened, that he was carried up the narrow stairs and across the courtyard, out through the gate and over the stone bridge, and was laid at the edge of the wood. I was alone with him. Some charcoal burners chanced to come, and in their cart I took my father from Syere. A good waggoner that same day helped us on to his load which he was taking to Dravstadt, and we came to the city, to the home of a woman who had known my mother. There, after many months of pain, my father died."

"You should have complained to the King," I said.

"King Philip! It would have been useless. Everybody knows he was as wicked as the seneschal. The King would only have laughed at me."

As the child said it, so definitely, so certain that she spoke no more than the truth, I felt that the King was

judged and condemned, and cursed myself for having so long served such a master.

"To Dravstadt I took the wax impression," she went on, "and I got a key made. I decided to return to Syere and take service in the castle so that I might be near the seneschal. Some day the opportunity would come and I should kill him, and escape by that door."

"Have you tried the key?"

"Not yet. Directly I was taken into the kitchen again, Her Highness came to Syere, and one of the servants who waited on her took me to my lady, and I had to serve her and be secret about her. So I have never been able to try the key. The soldier Max knew me and was so constantly in the hall."

"The key may not fit," I said.

"God would not act so," she said simply.

No such sublime faith was mine.

"Where is it?"

"Hidden in a safe place."

"Fetch it. We will go and try the door at once."

"Max stands sentry in the hall," she answered.

"Should he see me with you, he might think I was telling you about my father. He would talk to the seneschal and I might be sent away from Syere."

I was cudgelling my brain how I might get Max out of the way without arousing suspicion, when I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs on the stones of the courtyard which was directly below the window of my room. Had the Count come? The child went to the door.

"Shall I bring the key early to-morrow?" she asked.

"Yes. Max shall be out of the way then."

I followed her to the door and saw her disappear through the opening that led to the narrow stairway, going so quickly and silently that a mouse could hardly have attracted less attention. Then I went slowly down the other stairs to see who had come to Syere.

It was not the Count, but one of his Court, a man who had transferred his allegiance from King Philip easily. Somehow this seemed to me less of a crime now I had heard the little maid's story. Who would serve a King who could not be asked for justice?

"Greeting, Captain," he said.

"You bring news?" I asked.

"The best. If you hunger for the pleasures of Dravstadt you are likely to have that hunger satisfied."

"Truly, Syere is a dull place to live in," I answered.

"What is this good news from the capital?"

"The Count is to be crowned, and the city is already taking out its gala dress. We are to have a week at least of brave show and holiday. I am the bearer of a letter to Her Highness."

"A letter!"

"Important, and — let me whisper it — love in it I believe. That seems to me excellent news. And Captain, if the servants have grown lazy, you must see that they bestir themselves and fill up the larders to the topmost shelf. Unless I am a fool with no understanding, Syere is to see the signing of a marriage contract. In three days the Count and a brilliant company will be at the castle."

CHAPTER XVIII

HER HIGHNESS IS CAPRICIOUS

THREE days. It was a respite. To-morrow we would try the key in the lock of that secret door. In three days there was time even for my original scheme, should that after all seem the safest way of escape. If all went well we might easily be across the frontier before Christian of Varna came to Syere. Yet the news puzzled me exceedingly. Surely the seneschal had fled to Dravstadt with his news. It was strange that the Count should seek to hasten his marriage with the Princess just now. And how was it Madame Laroux had been so deceived? I was as one who fingers with the loose ends of a tangle, trying in vain to straighten it out. There were many possibilities, but I saw no safety for my lady in the Count's coming. I was still busy with the problem when the Princess sent for me.

The man who had come from Dravstadt was no longer with her, but Madame Laroux and Father Anthony were in the room, standing back in the shadows as though they were afraid of being sent away if they made themselves too conspicuous. A peat fire was burning on the hearth, it was always cold within the walls of Syere

whatever the time of year. Her Highness was seated by a table, the light from candles in silver sconces falling upon her, an arresting picture which might well charm any man. If she would only agree to this marriage, what a world of trouble she might save us all. The opened letter was in her hand.

"The Count comes to Syere in three days, Captain Heselton."

"So I have been informed, Your Highness."

"There is his letter. You may read it."

She held it out to me, and when I hesitated to take it shook it impatiently.

"Read it. I wish you to understand the position."

I was conscious that she watched me closely as, bending down a little that the light might fall better on the paper, I read the letter. Certainly it was never intended for any eyes but her own. It was expressed in the warmest terms of admiration. His chief desire was her happiness, the Count declared. The will of the people meant much to him, but in his dealings with her, love would ever be at the root of his actions. He was conscious that she was prejudiced against him, chiefly, he reasoned, because he had been forced upon her by her uncle, but he hoped presently to make her understand that he was a man wholly worthy of her regard. In both their hearts he knew lay a deep love of country, and it was in their power to heal many wounds and to give strength to the State to withstand any enemy who might come against it. He asked her to send

his messenger back to Dravstadt with the news that she was at one with him in this matter, and in three days he would come to Syere. Then he hoped to take his part in the rejoicings which should wake the slumbering echoes of the old walls.

"It is certainly a straightforward letter, Princess," I said as I handed it back to her, wondering why she had shown it to me. I knew that two pairs of eyes were watching me keenly out of the shadows, and that every word of mine must be eagerly listened to. Both the lady in waiting and the priest had given me some sort of confidence, and my attitude must have interest for them.

"You would have me thank him I suppose, and call myself his humble servant."

"Princess, I cannot presume to give advice so suddenly."

I might have said more had we been alone, for such a marriage would remove many difficulties.

The Princess threw the letter on to the table.

"You may read it, both of you. It may please you, Father Anthony; what you may think of it, madame, is beyond me. A woman who will voluntarily shut herself up in a place like this, as you are doing, must have views which I should not be likely to understand."

Evidently the Princess had made little effort to conciliate her lady in waiting as I had suggested she should do.

It was the priest who took the letter up; his thin hand was suddenly thrust forward into the light of the

candles and fastened upon it like the claw of a greedy bird. Madame read the letter over the priest's stooping shoulder. He seemed absorbed and quite unconscious that she was doing so; her face showed plainly that the Count had most successfully fooled her.

She finished reading and laughed a little.

"It amuses you, madame?" said the Princess.

"I think Your Highness cannot have attached much importance to the letter or you would hardly have allowed us to read it."

"I am willing to listen to advice," was the answer.

Madame Laroux glanced at me and then at the priest who was still bending over the letter. He had worked for this marriage, he had attempted to murder me that I might not ruin his scheme, he had deceived the Princess; yet, not a line of triumph curved in his ascetic face, and he did not look up to give me an opportunity of seeing his eyes.

"Were I in your place, Princess, this letter would make me afraid," said Madame.

"It has no effect upon me whatever; brings me neither fear nor pleasure."

"I marvel at it," Madame returned quickly. "I read danger in every line. Some scheme lies underneath the letter. Is it not strange this sudden determination to marry you? stranger still, that he seems to entertain no doubt that you will consent?"

"Very strange, as you say," the Princess replied. "What would you have me do?"

"Is there any escape from Syere?" Madame asked.

The priest looked up quickly.

I would have silenced Madame Laroux had I been able to give her a sign of warning, but she was looking at the Princess.

"If there be any way of escape, I would take it. I would send a letter to the Count telling him that he shall have his answer when he comes, but I should not await his coming."

I have seen an actress overplay her part, emphasising every point too much and so spoiling the effect; it seemed to me that Madame Laroux was doing so. She believed the letter was genuine and sought to play a last card by getting rid of her rival. I had little doubt that we could now count on her aid to reach the frontier, but I was afraid of the priest.

"Only Captain Heselton can tell us if there is a way of escape," said the Princess.

"Would you not first hear Father Anthony's advice?" I asked.

The priest spoke promptly as he pushed the letter across the table. The advice came without any hesitation.

"I say, too, escape if you can, Princess," and he looked at me.

Madame smiled at this endorsement of her opinion. I was astonished, so was the Princess.

"You are incomprehensible, Father. Not long ago —"

"Many things have happened since then, Princess, and I am not one of those who refuses to admit that he

has made a mistake. I have changed my mind since we last talked of this marriage."

"You speak as though it were a particular virtue to change one's mind. Would you have me change mine and marry the Count?"

"I would have you question Captain Heselton whether he can contrive your escape," the priest answered, and I wondered what was at work in the brain behind that hatchet face.

"I think you talk carelessly before the Captain of the Guard," I said.

"Will you not help me, then?" asked the Princess.

She was slow to take my warning. My words were intended to put her on her guard. Had I not already disclosed a plan to the Princess?

"You must not drive me to a sudden answer," I said.

"Nor am I to be driven to sudden action," she said, rising from her chair quickly and showing irritability. "I am not disposed to do as I am told, like a naughty child in a nursery. Indeed, I seem like a child with many nurses whose opinions do not agree. I have listened to your advice, but I shall decide for myself."

"There can be only one decision," said the priest.

For a moment she was silent, and then her eyes had fire in them.

"You think so, Father Anthony? Have you read the letter carefully? Read it again if you will. It is a straightforward letter; you may deny it, but the fact is not altered, and I fancy the Count thought more of the woman than the Princess when he wrote it. You

should know Christian of Varna, since you have plotted with him. He is a man who grasps firmly what his heart is set upon."

"Have you thought of the danger?" asked the priest.

"Yes. Do you suppose the Count has not? Still, he writes that letter."

"Your Highness must think of others."

"Why? Did you think of others when we talked together at St. Cuthbert's? when you offered pay to assassins that your schemes might not be frustrated?"

"Yes, Princess."

"You will search far before you get anyone to believe it. I think Father Anthony stood first in your thoughts, more, alone in them. For all your cleverness, the Count might have less leniency for your selfishness than he will have for mine. I am a woman, and love will conquer a man when nothing else will."

I stood looking from one to the other, wondering at this sudden outburst, and utterly ignorant of the meaning of it. True, the priest had plotted with the Count, but he had also schemed with the Princess, and I could well believe that he had so arranged that he should not be a loser, whichever side might win. Some hold they had on each other, no doubt, some secret there was between them, and this was a duel to prove which was the stronger. Victory seemed to rest with the Princess, for Father Anthony remained silent.

"It is no question to be answered offhand," she went on. "It may be this letter offers me no great good, but at least I have a choice of evils. Perhaps it would

be a crime to marry Christian of Varna; yet possibly it would be a greater crime to flee from the country. We will at least leave the decision until to-morrow," and she waved her hand in dismissal.

I opened the door, and stood aside for Madame Laroux and Father Anthony to pass out. I was following them when the Princess stopped me, and signed that I should close the door.

"Do you regret your promise to help me, Captain Heselton?"

"No, Princess."

"After reading this letter you would advise me to go?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Whether you are prepared to marry the Count or not. I am dull-witted, I fear, for I do not understand your attitude."

"A little dull-witted, I think," she said slowly. "No, I shall not marry the Count."

"Then I must contrive to carry you across the frontier," I answered. "If you refuse to answer that letter as the Count desires, you must be in danger."

"We must escape," she said, "but I do not like your plan. I have thought of it, and I can only see failure in it. A woman is gifted with an intuition which seldom misleads her."

"I think there is another way," I answered. "To-morrow I shall know for certain."

"Another way! Is it one by which we can go

alone?" she asked, her hand suddenly laid on my arm.

"Alone!"

"You are too trustful, Captain Heselton. I trust no one but you; no trooper in the Guard, no servant in the castle, no one. Do you understand? If my flight is to be successful, we must go alone. Find the way to-morrow, and I will contrive that no one shall see us take it."

All that my lady had said to me flashed through my brain, but it was absurd to suppose that the Princess had any thought of me as a woman will think of a man; yet, what did she mean?

"There is another to consider," I said.

"I trust no one," she repeated. "Unless we go alone, I will not go at all. I should be afraid."

"Princess!"

We both turned quickly. By a door leading to the apartments beyond, my lady had entered the room. She was dressed as I had seen her last night, in a hideous cloak and square-toed boots, a strange contrast to the Princess. I did not move. I expected Her Highness to bid her go. Sudden anger came into her eyes, but she controlled herself and did not speak.

My lady crossed the room to the table and saw the letter.

"May I read it?" she asked.

"No."

With her hand stretched out towards it, my lady paused and looked at her mistress.

"Read it if you will," said the Princess, turning her

back upon her, and with her hand stretched up to grasp the high mantelpiece, she stood looking into the fire while my lady read the letter.

"You must go, Princess," she said.

"You are not the first to give me that advice to-night."

"Captain Heselton will find a way for us," said my lady.

The Princess turned quickly, but for a space there was silence.

"I have talked to Captain Heselton, and it is for him to decide," said the Princess slowly. "The Count does not come for three days. Captain Heselton has plenty of time to think well before he chooses how he will act."

"I have chosen," I said. "Your Highness must know that you cannot consider yourself only in this matter."

"Think, think —" and my lady went close to her and would have touched her, but the Princess drew herself back.

"I have thought."

"We will argue with each other afterwards, when we are safe," said my lady.

"No, now. Are you incapable of a sacrifice?"

"I may make it, but you know that I must go with you from Syere."

"That letter suggests that I might not appeal to the Count in vain," said the Princess.

"You mean —"

"I mean that I might do wisely to wait until the Count comes."

The words were flung out like a challenge, and the two women stood facing each other, looking into each other's eyes, fencing each other with that marvellous intuition which none but a woman knows. I had not the key to their meaning, and any man in such circumstances would feel a fool, I suppose. I did, at any rate. It was feeling a fool which brought a foolish thought. I wondered whether that self-satisfied page would have ventured to say he understood the Princess. Was ever a woman so full of whims, such a weathercock in a wind storm, swinging to every point of the compass in the course of a few moments? I could not understand her, which, being a man, was hardly remarkable, perhaps, but my lady did not seem to understand her either; and all the time the Princess appeared to consider herself a perfectly reasonable being.

My lady presently walked slowly across the room. I thought she was angry and used this method to control herself. I found she had another purpose.

"We must talk about that, Your Highness. I am open to conviction," she said, turning and standing near the door which led through the vestibule to the corridor. "I do not think it would interest Captain Heselton; and in case you decide to go, he has doubtless much to arrange."

Heaven knows I blessed her for this release.

"You will come to me early to-morrow," said the Princess.

I bowed, and went towards the door. As I opened it, glancing at my lady, she moved as though she were in a hurry to have me gone, but contrived to be close to me for a moment.

"In an hour. On the narrow stairs. Wait," she whispered.

CHAPTER XIX

WATCHMEN ON THE HILLS

LONG before the hour had passed, I was waiting on those narrow stairs, cursing the minutes which went with such leaden feet. To him who counts the moments, and must stay inactive, fear comes easily. I was in a jaundiced condition, twisting every shadow into the shape of an enemy, magnifying every danger into a terror; and never was man more desirous of using brute force upon a woman than I upon the Princess Suzanne. Was she to ruin us by her capriciousness? But for her whims we might even now be winning our way to safety.

And at the back of my mind was fear of another sort. I wondered how long my lady had been in the room to-night before she spoke. The Princess's hand was on my arm when we had turned at the sound of her voice; nothing in that, surely, but women think strange things sometimes, and my lady had already spoken curiously about Her Highness. Women are wonderful; God has made them so; and often there is nothing too absurd for a woman to believe — God has made them like that, too.

When, presently, there was a slight movement on the



stairs, I was ready on the instant for peril, but it was only the door opening a little way, and a whisper bid me enter. I followed my lady into a little room, almost bare of furniture, lighted only by a lantern, and so dimly that I could scarcely see her face.

"Have you persuaded the Princess, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"Not yet."

She spoke sharply, almost angrily.

"You must do so quickly."

"Have you ever tried to persuade an unreasonable woman?" she asked.

"What would she have? Would she stay and marry the Count?"

"I think not, but I believe I understand her," she said, rather as though she were answering questions in her own mind than answering me; "and truly, I can feel some pity for her."

"This is no time for pity, mademoiselle. Disaster is racing nearer to us every hour. Are you to be sacrificed because the Princess does not know her own mind?"

"What more can I do?"

"You must think of yourself. Leave Syere tonight — now — this instant."

"How? Have you found a way?"

Eagerly I told her of the kitchen maid and the secret door, and of the escape of the seneschal.

"He has doubtless gone to Dravstadt, mademoiselle, and by this time the Count has news of a serving maid

at Syere. Send for this child at once. She will guide us to that door. By dawn we may be far upon our journey."

"I cannot leave Her Highness."

"You must."

"It is impossible."

"If she will not come, what else can you do?"

"I cannot explain; you would not understand. I only know I must not leave her."

"Listen, mademoiselle; you have done all you can to persuade her. God knows what is in the back of her brain, but her folly shall not be your ruin. I know the Count; you, too, know something of him; do you suppose, even if he be ready to marry the Princess, he will cease to persecute another woman whose beauty has inflamed him?"

"I cannot leave the Princess."

"It is no ordinary man you have set on fire," I went on earnestly, "but a king with life and death in his hands. Why should you stay? Fearless you may be, but the best your bravery could win for you would be death; the worst —"

"I do not fear death," she said, "and for the worst —"

"Mademoiselle, the thought of it for you makes me tremble like a child in the dark."

"You cannot frighten me, Captain Heselton."

"Nor can I move you, either. I am quickly learning what it is to argue with an unreasonable woman."

"You do not understand."

"You do not see the danger, mademoiselle, you —"

"Already I have used arguments of this sort with Her Highness," said my lady. "I do realise the danger."

"Is the Princess blind to it? What answer had she?"

"Bid me fulfil my destiny and marry Christian of Varna if he would have me."

"Never," I cried. "As God is in His heaven — never. Though I be one man against the world — never."

She did not answer, and the silence after this sudden outburst was oppressive.

"I think I would rather kill you here and now than that Christian of Varna should come to Syere and find you," I whispered.

"It seems I am beset with savagery," she said.

"Send for the child and let us be going."

"Not to-night."

"You must. You shall. If I have little understanding of women, I know men. I know Christian of Varna. Send for the child."

"Not to-night," she repeated.

"I say you shall," and I caught her by the arm, roughly, I fear. I was beside myself thinking of her danger.

"You hurt me," she said, but her arm was not drawn away. What pain there was, she bore unflinchingly. She stood beside me, close to me, touching me, her face

turned to me. I could feel the swift beating of her heart, and her breath was on my cheek.

"Send for the child."

"No," she said.

"Or I will take you as you are, carry you out of Syere, fight my way through the gate, if need be. Christian of Varna shall not touch you while I live."

"You hurt me, Captain Heselton."

She did not move, nor did I for a moment, and then I caught her hand and pressed it passionately to my lips.

"Forgive me. It is not only one heart you have set on fire, and a man may grow reckless with the pain of it. Fortune has spared me such torment until now. Forgive me."

I let her hand go and immediately it touched my arm.

"Do not think me capricious, Captain Heselton. I cannot explain, but to-night it is impossible for me to go. Do you make sure of the way, and to-morrow I will go once more to the Princess — early to-morrow. I will persuade her, or —"

"Yes, mademoiselle?"

"If she will not come, I will go with you alone."

"I will come to you to-morrow, early," I said.

"How will you know that I am waiting?"

"I shall listen by the door yonder. Just one low knock and I will open it."

"God keep you until then," I said, raising her hand to my lips once more. She was so close to me, her body touching mine, that it would have been only a slight

movement to have had her in my arms. Love prompted me to courage, to take what was within my grasp and seek satisfaction on this woman's lips. A little while since and I should have done so, boldly confident that a woman is to be won this way and loves to be mastered. But with my love for my lady there was mingled a reverence which restrained me. She was not as other women.

"God keep you," I whispered again. A more earnest prayer had not passed my lips for many a day.

"And I thank God for sending me a strong man in my need," she said slowly.

I cannot tell whether love or fear was paramount with me that night. I threw myself, dressed as I was, upon my bed, conscious that little sleep had come to me during the past night or two, yet I felt no weariness. Now I was listening for a sound that might presage danger; now I was in a lover's dream, walking in a land of perpetual spring, of undying flowers, where perfume was always, where was hushed laughter while secrets were whispered. I went rejoicing in the beauty of her who walked beside me, touching my hand, turning eyes and lips to me to be kissed. And then again I was a soldier, lying on a hard bed within the walls of Syere, an adventurer with only peril near him. Fear was with me because of a woman, yet I think love had the upper hand, for presently I wandered deeper and deeper into that land of Spring, gladness with me and a great singing in my heart. But, after a while, I found it a somewhat strange country, and stood to look about me. At

my feet it was ploughed into heavy ruts, where a moment since only flowers had been. Before me a sudden tangle was twisted, rope-like across my path, and the roar of some angry animal broke the silence of a near thicket. I was alone. I endeavoured not to notice the change, tried not to believe it; and then the roaring came so close to me, at my very ear, that I started aside quickly to escape the downward sweep of some infuriated animal's paw. As a fact, I had sat up on my bed, roused by O'Connell's rough shaking and his voice calling loudly. He had woke me from a deep sleep.

"Captain! Captain!"

"What is it?"

"Faith, you sleep like death."

"Well, what is it?"

"Not judgment day, for which most of us may be thankful; but I'd have you come to the top of the tower."

"To see the dawn?" I asked.

"That's past, but you'll find it worth while to climb the stairs."

Without waiting to be questioned further, he strode out of the room and I followed him.

I had slept late. The world was glistening with morning; the good earth was breathing perfume; a breeze rustled the tree tops, and the birds were talking busily in the crannies of the rock.

"Yonder," said O'Connell, leaning on the battlements and pointing towards the high ground. "Yonder. Carry your eye from the place where the winding road

reaches the hill top along the ridge to the right; there comes a gap in the line of it."

"Yes."

"It is plain now, something that sparkles," said O'Connell.

"Men moving, the light catching them," I said.

"Ay, catching the steel they carry. Now look away to the left, it is plainer still there, dipping down towards the dark line of the woods which run up the hill side."

"I see. More visitors to Syere, O'Connell."

"They travel a strange way, Captain."

"Has no one come down the winding road?"

"No one. I saw by the first streak of daylight that men had come to the high ground, to the very ridge at the top of the road. Even as I saw them, they went back as though they had suddenly remembered the light in the east and how clearly they must show against it. I watched, but there was nothing on the road. Then I caught the first dancing point of light to the left, moving horsemen, Captain. To get food into a ravenous stomach I have served at sea, and wind and the salt spray have made my eyes keener than most. If the men yonder come to Syere, they take a queer road."

I was silent.

"If we were in siege, I could understand it," he went on; "an enemy bent on preventing the bringing in of supplies, or the escape of the garrison. I warrant those fellows believe they have not been seen."

"The seneschal has told his tale in Dravstadt, O'Connell."

"What tale?"

I did not answer. Could I trust this Irishman? I sorely needed a friend, and he might help me to win safety presently.

"Are you believing that I had a hand in his escape?" he asked. "I knew nothing of it, but I'm thinking Max's surprise was very like the play-acting in a booth at a country fair, as like the real thing as a Hottentot woman is to an Irish girl. It seemed to me he talked strangely like a liar."

"I doubt not it was Max who helped the seneschal out of Syre," I answered. "I have good reason for thinking so."

"What story had the seneschal to tell, Captain? Is the Princess to be smuggled out of the castle? Sure, if that's it, there's no time to lose. Night won't fall before there's a ring of watchmen round Syre."

"The Princess and another," and then I stopped short, afraid to say more.

O'Connell looked all around him, then brought his eyes steadily to mine.

"I think we are alone, Captain."

I never saw a more honest look in a man's face. I would trust him.

"Do you remember making enquiry for a serving maid at the Ange-Gardien Tavern, O'Connell?"

"Ay, and I remember the landlord's whistle, too."

"She came once to the barrack yard," I said.

"Captain, I can hear her hand on Max's ugly face at this minute."

"The Count has seen her."

"And you?"

"The Count would win her," I said.

"Is that the way of it? The Count and you. It's no equal match, Captain — a cock with a spur against a bird with none."

"You forget the woman," I said.

"Faith, I never saw her, more's the pity; but plague take 'em, they're mostly alike when it comes to a choice of plumage. It's the gay feathers they'll be after, rather than the drab."

"This woman has hidden herself from the Count."

"Trust a woman for that same artifice. Doesn't she know well that man was a hunter by nature from the beginning of time, and cares most for that which is hard to catch?"

"She hid herself here, O'Connell."

"In Syere?"

"Yes."

"And the seneschal saw her?"

"Yes."

"You should have slit his throat, Captain."

"Wisdom sometimes comes too late," I answered.

"Are you with me in this venture?"

"There's the family tie, Captain, and I'd love to have one glorious minute with German Max."

"There is a secret way out of Syere, and that is the way we go. Even now the Princess and the maid should be awaiting my coming. Be by the door that closes the stairs leading to the dungeons, O'Connell."

"And then, Captain?"

"For the woods yonder, and as quick a journey as may be to the frontier," I answered; "and afterwards, O'Connell, money enough to win to Ireland and peaceful days there if you are so minded."

"Faith, the devil never tempted Anthony to better purpose," he returned. "You will find me by the door."

By now, please God, my lady should be ready. I was in a fever to be gone. We must be outside that ring of watchmen before they had succeeded in completely surrounding Syere. So I went quickly down the stairs, leaving O'Connell to follow.

But sometime before the dawn, before the Irishman could see them, horsemen had descended the winding road, and must have entered the castle, either while I slept, or so silently since then that no noise of their coming had reached me. As I came into the hall, out of which the Princess's apartments opened, Christian of Varna reached the top of the wide staircase and came forward to meet me.

CHAPTER XX

THE SYMBOL OF A BROKEN GLASS

HAD there been a choice between Christian of Varna and the devil, I would sooner have stood face to face with the devil just then.

"I come before my time, Captain," was his greeting.

"And are none the less welcome for that, Count," I answered.

By the expression in his eyes I judged that he was a little puzzled at my attitude. I think he had expected to surprise a look of consternation in my face, but he was not the only man who could play a part and act a lie. Not for an instant was I deceived. The message that he would come in three days had been sent to throw me off my guard. His sudden advent was to frustrate any scheme I had in hand, while if, with all his speed, he should arrive too late, and I had contrived to get my lady out of the castle, watchmen were on the hills to intercept her. That he was in time had put him in an excellent humour.

"It is the way of a lover to be restless," he said.

"As it is the way of a man to marvel when beauty goes neglected," I returned. "Each day the Princess

has been in my keeping I have wondered the more that you could delay your coming so long."

"A king may make an excellent lover, Heselton, but he is not free like other men. There should ever be something secret in love if you would taste the fulness of it, if you would have the wine of it sparkling to the brim, and secrecy is difficult for a king. This Syere is a gloomy place."

"Her Highness finds it so, I fear, Count, for she persists in calling herself a prisoner."

"Women often love martyrdom. We have come to set her free, Captain. So you think her beautiful?"

"Worthy to grace a throne," I answered.

Whatever scheme was in his mind he should understand that I placed only one interpretation on his presence in Syere.

"Each man's heart has a throne for some woman if he can find her," he answered.

"True. Will you go to the Princess at once?"

"What, with the dust of travel still upon me?"

"Why not?" and I laughed carelessly to emphasise that candid speech which one man will use to another.

"I think a woman appreciates a reckless lover."

"A kiss by force followed by surrender," he laughed.

"I can understand the joy of it, but I look for no such easy victory."

"Yet may find it," I said.

"What, open arms, and a smile like a rose opening its petals to the sun?"

"It is not impossible. I saw her after the messen-

ger had delivered your letter, and she seemed strangely moved, it seemed to me. You must judge, Count, what was in your letter to make her so."

Again he looked puzzled. I fancied I was the better actor of the two.

"I will get rid of the dust first," he said after a moment's pause.

"When Madame Laroux came to the castle, you sent another message, Count; I thought it wise not to exchange the men asked for."

"You were quite right. The exchange was suggested by the officer who, in your absence, commands in Dravstadt. You were here and of course knew what was best."

I did not believe him, but if he lied, he lied well.

"I have brought a numerous company with me to Syere," he went on, "and to-night a banquet shall celebrate our coming. Will you send for the seneschal, Captain? I trust the larders are full to overflowing and that the cellars match their abundance worthily."

"The seneschal! Have you not seen him in Dravstadt?" I asked.

"In Dravstadt? What should he be doing in the capital?"

"He fled from the castle, I thought to complain to you of the way I treated him."

"I have heard that he is a surly fellow," the Count answered. "What was his offence?"

"He imagined there could be two masters in Syere," I said. "It was necessary to prove that impossible."

"You should have hanged him."

"It might have been a good plan."

"And he is gone," he laughed; "afraid to stay with you and afraid to come to me. A poor sort of fellow, evidently, who is not worth troubling about. Since he is gone, Captain, you must act, for once, as seneschal and be honoured guest as well. We will feast to-night, set laughter's music trembling about these grim old walls, and send it, perchance, into many a hidden place within them."

"It will have to be loud laughter to penetrate to the dungeons, Count."

"Then by all we hold dear, we will drink until we make the laughter loud enough," he answered.

I did not go with the Count when he visited the Princess, nor dared I venture any attempt to get a word with my lady. The company which had come to the castle consisted almost entirely of men from Varna, and they quickly seemed to take possession of the place. I met them wherever I went. Two, with a good fellowship as sudden as it was undesired, came to my quarters. To get rid of them I pleaded the work I had to do, and so persistently that they were forced to leave me. I knew well enough that they had been set to watch me, and only went because they were anxious not to arouse my suspicions. What to do for the best was a question. I was groping in the dark. What scheme the Count was engaged upon, I could not tell, but I was very sure that my lady was in danger and that I was powerless to help her. I was a rat in a trap, forced to act as though I

were unconscious of being caught. In this dilemma, I must put my trust in O'Connell, and I contrived presently to get a few moments with him alone. He was to go to my lady in my stead as soon as the banquet was served. I wrote a hasty line for him to give her. The kitchen maid would guide them to the secret door, and they would make for the frontier with all the speed they could employ.

"Steal horses, O'Connell, if you can. Some farmstead, or some woodcutter's dwelling may be your opportunity. Keep to the forest until you have passed the ring of watchmen. It is a desperate venture, but it must be made."

"Will she go without you?"

"She must. You have my written message and you must persuade her. Show her that for me, escape will be easy, not to-night, perhaps, but to-morrow or the day after. I shall follow you to the frontier. I shall see to it that the wine circulates freely to-night; you shall have many good hours before pursuit is thought of. If I can so contrive it, I will help to lead that pursuit myself, and every hole that might serve as a hiding-place shall be searched as we go, so that we may be delayed as much as possible."

"And you, Captain?"

I saw his meaning. He knew how unlikely it was that I should succeed in winning freedom.

"Does it matter?" I said, looking him straight in the eyes.

"I suppose not," he answered, after a pause. "You

will not be the first who has walked into hell's mouth because you find one woman fairer than all her sisters. I will do my best. No man can promise more."

"Brothers, O'Connell," I said, gripping his hand as I left him. Yet I could not help wondering if I had put my faith in a reed, or worse — a strong stake sharp with treachery for my undoing.

It suited me to be seneschal as well as Captain that day; my movements occasioned less comment than they otherwise would have done. I bullied servants into activity to which they had long been unaccustomed; I set men of the Guard to work for which they were never intended, always with a view that the way of my lady's escape might be as free as possible that evening. I made German Max chief over some of his fellows to keep order in the guardrooms and stables, and I ordered them extra drink to compensate for their increased labour, confident they would far overstep the license I gave them. The castle should be a scene of orgy to-night if I could make it so, and I played the good comrade to the Guard as I had never done before. I also got a word with the kitchen maid and sent her to her mistress.

"Have you the key?"

She touched her dress near the waist.

"Keep it safe, and when the Irishman O'Connell comes to-night, go at once."

So I laid my plans, testing their worth at every point as far as I could. A score of things might happen which it was impossible for me to foresee, but as twilight gathered, I could think of nothing I had left undone,

nothing more I might do. For the rest I must trust to readiness of wit, and to the prompting of the moment.

It was a large hall in which the banquet was served, the tables occupying only the upper end of it. Men of the Guard stood by the door, and servants, unused to such a festival, bustled with nervous activity. A great fire was piled upon the wide hearth, and light and warmth touched walls and glowed in vaulted roof which had been left in cold and darkness for many a long day. I think the larders must have been severely tried to furnish the feast, but the cellars were generously stocked and there was no lack of wine.

"I called you guest, I should more rightly have called you host," said the Count as he entered the hall, "and a most excellent host, indeed."

"I fear, sir, it is after all only a rough festival with which Syere welcomes a king and a lover," I answered.

Again a puzzled look came into his face. I was ignorant of his schemes, but he was evidently not quite certain that I was powerless to upset them. I was conscious that he watched me all through the feast.

We were only men at the board. The Count was at the centre of the table, and I had kept a place at the end nearest the door for myself. It was my natural place, since from this position I could hurry the servants if they became laggard. Father Anthony sat with us, against his will, I fancy, for the Count urged him to drink wine enough to put some merriment into his face. Whether the Count was surprised to find him at Syere, I do not know, but I thought the priest was not altogether

comfortable in our company. He stood for the death's head at the feast, silent in the midst of the boisterous life about him. He watched the Count closely, perchance as puzzled as I was, and a little afraid of him, I thought; and at intervals he glanced sharply at me. It may be that I, too, presented a riddle to him, for I grew boisterous as others did, and laughed as loudly. I was quick to taunt my neighbours for sparing the wine, and I bullied servants for their dilatoriness in replenishing the glasses. Yet I contrived to drink sparingly myself; it became easier to deceive even those nearest to me as the evening progressed and the wine circulated more freely. The feast was going to my satisfaction.

"The wine is good and comes from a full cellar," I said to those about me. "King's property, no doubt, but for to-night I am seneschal and hold the keys."

This was the spirit that appealed to them. I talked, caring little what I said, laughing at anything or nothing, and all the while I was thinking of my lady. If O'Connell had not betrayed my confidence, if the key fitted that secret door, if nothing unforeseen had happened, then by this hour my lady must be free of Syere, and every moment must be carrying her nearer to safety. Yet it was terrifying to think how many things might have hindered her flight, and seeing Father Anthony's keen eyes fixed upon me at that moment, I wondered whether my anxiety showed itself in my face. Lest it did, I made some inane jest, and my own laughter was the loudest which answered it.

"A toast," cried the Count. "Her Highness, Princess Suzanne."

In an instant we were all on our feet to honour the toast, one or two a little unsteady in their rising, I noted with satisfaction, and we roared the Princess's name until the vaulted roof rang again.

"Will that suffice to reach the secret places in Syere, Captain?" the Count called to me.

"You would not ask, sir, had you descended to the dungeons," I answered. "It is a proverb, almost, that a dungeon in Syere is worse than death, and what laughter is that which can break into the silence of death?"

"More wine," he cried; "we will attempt the impossible."

I watched him closely. For a moment the noise had abated as though my words had had a sobering effect, but it was quickly as great as ever.

"A toast," cried the Count again. "Captain Heseltan, who proves himself as good a seneschal as he is Captain of the Guard."

Now my name was rolling in the vaulted roof. Please heaven they would find the wine so much to their liking that toast would follow toast until even the spirit of luxurious Lucullus might smile with greedy satisfaction, and morning find these rioters sleeping amongst the ruins of the feast.

"I warrant your name has penetrated even to the silence of a dungeon," said the Count.

It was a sally which called forth renewed laughter.

The guests were mostly on that border line between sobriety and drunkenness when it is easy to laugh, the occasion being of no import; but I heard a sinister meaning under the jesting words. The Count was thinking of his scheme which he knew I should oppose, and a dungeon might well follow such opposition.

"Will no one call a toast to the King?" I shouted. "The honouring of it should send his name deeper than mine could ever go."

That I called him King raised his followers to enthusiasm. A dozen or more sprang to their feet, but the Count silenced them with a gesture as he rose in his place.

"Gentlemen, that toast must wait. Before many days have passed I hope to be almost deafened by the shouts with which you will answer it, but we are at Syere for another purpose, as some of you are aware."

There was silence round the table, but I warrant no one present there listened more eagerly than I. Surely, whatever was in the Count's mind, my lady was by this hour beyond his reach.

"To come to the throne peaceably and with the good will of all is my ambition," he went on, "but there are still many difficulties in my path which are only to be overcome by address and careful diplomacy. One difficulty has been the Princess Suzanne, and it is this difficulty which has brought us to Syere."

He paused for a moment, and the silence was trying.

"Happily, there is less difficulty than I had anticipated. I have spent some time with Her Highness to-

day, and have convinced her, I believe, how desirous I am for her well-being in the future."

He paused again, and there was a murmur of satisfaction. Had the Princess promised to marry him?

"Not always have you agreed with my methods," the Count went on, "though you have been loyal to me. That I honoured some who had remained staunch to King Philip did not please you all, yet, in many cases, you have come to understand that I acted wisely. One instance I may give. Many of you were against me when I appointed Captain Heselton to command the Guard, yet —"

"A good Captain. A most excellent Captain."

I took no notice of these answers which came from either side of the table; I was watching the Count.

"So you will understand that behind my actions there has ever been the consideration of the future," he went on slowly. "There have been, there still are, factions to deal with, open wounds to be healed, and not in a moment is this to be done. To further my plans for the peaceful settlement of this land, I have decided to raise Captain Heselton to greater honour, to bind him to us by the strongest bonds I can forge. He shall be ennobled, shall be made a Prince in this land, bound to it as a native is bound to it; so rank and patriotism shall render him worthy of the high place I purpose for him, for the honour which shall be his."

Very deliberately he signed to a servant, who stood behind him, to fill his glass.

"Gentlemen," and he turned towards me, "Gentle-

men, you will drink with me once again to Captain Heselton, who is forthwith to become the husband of the Princess Suzanne."

I know not whether any were taken by surprise at this announcement, or whether they were all in the plot, or whether they were too far gone in liquor to comprehend its full meaning. They rose as one man, even Father Anthony, I noted, held a brimming glass in his hand.

"Heselton! Heselton!" they shouted.

In a moment I was on my feet.

"Stop!" I cried, bringing my clenched fist down upon the table with a savage blow.

There was a sudden silence.

"One thing you forget, Count, my consent to this hideous bargaining."

As I spoke I flung my glass into the air, and its smashing to fragments on the stone floor sounded strangely loud and ominous.

"You hear it," I cried. "To the devil with your honours. Keep them for some more complacent fool. Your foul scheme is shivered to atoms even as the glass yonder. There is no power that can make me husband to Princess Suzanne."

CHAPTER XXI

THE PENALTY OF FAILURE

IT was the prompting of the moment, a challenge thrown to chance, whether wisely or not I did not pause to consider. A more cunning man might have found a way out of the dilemma by a pretence of acquiescence, but I was too blunt and reckless for such manœuvring. I waited for the Count to speak; it was for him to make the next move in the game. I felt rather than heard the slight shuffle of feet about me and the rustling of garments, as all turned to look upon one who dared such defiance; and I was conscious that the hatchet face of Father Anthony was crinkled into a smile. Why this proposal should give him any satisfaction, or how such a scheme could fit in with his own, Heaven alone knew. One good thing was in the situation thus forced upon me, for a little while I must be the centre of interest, and every moment was of value to my lady to-night.

The Count slowly replaced his glass upon the table, showing no anger; his hand was so steady that, although the wine was to the brim in the glass, no drop was spilled. He said nothing, and I waited, leaning a little over the table to watch him. My wit must answer him when he

did speak, and if summary vengeance were in his mind, then my strong arm must help me as best it could. I felt that death rubbed shoulders with me, but that is nothing to frighten a man if his conscience be not at odds with him.

I saw the Count give no sign, unless the setting down his glass were one, but I was suddenly seized from behind, my arms were caught backwards, and my sword was taken from me. It was deftly done, unexpected, and for a moment I felt incapable of gathering my strength for any resistance. Possibly I might have remained submissive, reserving myself for a better opportunity, had not a voice hissed in my ear:

“We change places, Captain, and it shall be the same dungeon.”

It was the seneschal. The Count had deceived me, and the sight of this man put fire into my brain and steel into my muscles. I bent and twisted my body to face my captors, and looked into the very eyes of disaster. It was German Max who clung to me on one side, on the other I was held by O'Connell. This villainous Irishman had betrayed me. My lady was still in Syere. The knowledge drove me to the verge of madness. I did not speak, but I wrenched my arm free from the German and struck him as straight and as hard as I could. He went reeling like some idiotic dancer trying a new step backwards on his heels, a dozen yards at least he went before he fell, but he managed to save his head from the stone floor and struggled to his feet again, cursing as he wiped the blood from his mouth. The

seneschal had skipped out of my reach, and my next blow would have been for O'Connell had he not suddenly staggered away from me, although I was unconscious of making any effort to swing him off. For one instant I was free, then other men of the Guard were upon me and I was a prisoner.

"To the dungeons," cried the seneschal in a voice shrill with savage emotion. "To the dungeons. There shall be no escape while I am gaoler."

Then the Count spoke.

"You made a mistake, Captain Heselton; you should have hanged the seneschal."

He smiled as he turned to an officer beside him, who immediately left his place and assumed command of the Guard.

I struggled no more, it would only be to waste energy to no purpose, but a fiendish prayer, if such a prayer can be, flashed through my brain, that a moment might be given me presently in which I might wring the seneschal's neck. So I passed out of the hall.

My journey ended sooner than I had anticipated. I was thrust into a room not far from the banqueting hall, and the stout door was locked upon me. Black as pitch was the darkness, but I knew the room, knew that it was of some size and was sparsely furnished, knew that it was partially hung with worn and faded tapestry, and that its high windows looked so closely on to a flat wall that little light found its way in even at noon. The very thought of escape from such a prison was absurd.

I felt my way to a chair and sank into it, as near broken by despair as a man could be. I had fancied myself the better actor of the two, but at all points the Count had beaten me. While he had hidden his scheme from me, he had guessed mine, had suspected that I should endeavour to get my lady out of Syere that night, and had bought or coerced O'Connell. Perchance he had already seen my lady, guided to her hiding place by the seneschal. She was absolutely in his power. For a time my brain refused to go beyond this central fact. I had failed; nothing else mattered. I did not speculate even why I had been brought to this room instead of being thrown into a dungeon at once. I think I had a desire to have done with everything, to pay the penalty of failure and make an end of my adventures. I fancy when a man comes to this, when the heart is out of him, there is ever a little fear mixed with his desires. I think I was afraid of what the seneschal might do if I were left to his mercy. I remembered the woodman, sightless and with his reason darkened. Pandora's box was opened and the evil luggage of it crushed me, yet, as ever, hope was at the bottom of it, a small thing indeed, but I grasped it. Why had O'Connell staggered back from me? Certainly I had not thrown him off. Had he left a strange, a warning pressure on my arm as he let it go? Never did straw seem less capable of bearing the weight of a drowning man than did this frail hope appear sufficient to hold up one who was sinking into the depths of despair; yet I clutched it, held it fast, and my brain began to scheme again.

In the midst of my scheming, the door opened. A servant entered carrying candles, which he placed upon the table. As he withdrew, the Count and three others came in, and the door was closed. The Count came to the table and sat down beside it, the others crossed the room and remained standing at a distance as though they were determined not to hear a word of the conversation. I had not risen from my chair. Why should I pretend to serve this man any more?

"We seem fated to meet under strange circumstances," said the Count. "I am reminded of another interview I had with you, Captain Heselton."

"This time you come better attended," I said, nodding towards his companions.

"Yes, I was a little afraid."

"Such fear does you credit. No man is all a villain who can still hear his conscience speak."

"It was for you I was afraid," he answered. "You are unarmed, but even so no mean antagonist. There is no telling what a desperate man may do, and I have no desire for your death."

"Let us have done with such courtesy, Count. We have played a game in which the loser pays, so my life is forfeit. Your conditions are impossible."

"Yet I have come to talk of them. I bear you no malice for what you did just now, but I would argue the matter."

"It is useless."

"Still, it pleases me to argue, Captain Heselton. Were we just two men, brothers in arms as we talked of

once, you remember, we should have our quarrel, fight it out per chance, and so end it. Unfortunately, this is impossible. I am a King, you are the Captain of my Guard."

"The advantage lies with you," I said.

"True. I have only to issue an order and there is an end of my difficulty, but it is not a method that pleases me. Let me explain the situation."

"Is that necessary?"

He looked at me for a moment, and then laughed quietly as though some humorous idea had flitted through his brain.

"Indeed it is more complicated than you imagine, and yet easier than I expected. Princess Suzanne has a following in Saxe-Oldenburg, in numbers small, in influence formidable. These followers demand that I shall marry Her Highness, and I listen to them. They are persuaded that I have at last come to understand the advisability of such an alliance; they believe that my visit to Syere is the preliminary step towards its accomplishment."

"Does not the Princess think so, too?" I asked.

"She did," he answered, "and found no pleasure in the prospect. Many women have looked upon me with favour, the Princess has the bad taste not to be one of them. She has no wish to marry me."

"Are you sure of that?"

He shot a glance at me as though he would read some hidden meaning behind my question. Then he laughed again.

"As sure of it as you are, Heselton."

"Pardon, Count, I have come no nearer to understanding Her Highness than I was the first time I spoke to her."

"You will," he said quietly, and then after a pause he went on: "The complication goes deeper still. She has no desire to ascend the throne, either as my wife or alone; yet, since she has an important following, she must always be a danger to me except under two conditions. By marrying her I could escape the danger, but charming as she is, I have no desire to marry her. That condition is, therefore, out of the question. The other condition is that she should marry someone whom her followers would not countenance even as her consort on the throne. If such a marriage is accomplished, there is not a man amongst them who would uphold her rights. That is why I have chosen you for her husband."

"A clever scheme," I answered. "Was it in your mind when you visited me in the barrack hospital at Dravstadt?"

"I hardly know," he answered, with a smile; "the germ of it was there, perhaps, but time was necessary for its present perfection; and circumstances, too, have matured it. Have you considered how much you stand to win, Heselton?"

"I do not bargain even with myself," I answered.

"What I said in the hall just now, I will perform. You shall be a power in the State, a prince of the realm, a man I shall honour as a friend. Such a chance comes

to few. It is all gain surely, wealth and power, and a wife whose beauty no man can deny."

"Have you put this fantastic proposal before the Princess?"

"I have."

"With threats?"

"That is not my way with a woman, Heselton."

"I warrant Her Highness laughed."

"She did, and very happily. I never saw her look more beautiful."

"I answer with your own words, Count. Charming as she is, I have no desire to marry her. Issue your orders. I do not whine or cry for mercy."

"Were you not a man I should not trouble about you," he answered.

"Then I will make one petition. Let death come soon, and let it be a death that befits a soldier. I have some knowledge of the seneschal's devilry and would not be left to his tenderness."

"If you die, you shall die as a soldier."

"I thank you."

"You have a strange opinion of me, Heselton. First you think I use threats to a woman, now you imagine me a ruffian who would allow a man to be worried by a mongrel. With all my faults I do assure you there is better stuff in me than that."

"I give you thanks, and I make you an apology," I answered.

It was impossible not to have some liking for this

man, enemy though he was. Under other circumstances we might have been excellent comrades.

"But we go too fast, Captain," he went on, and again some humorous fancy seemed to be in his mind. "I have said the Princess laughed happily, does that surprise you?"

"It may be that she has some scheme which she hopes will checkmate yours."

"It was the woman who laughed, Heselton, not the Princess, and by all the saints in the calendar I came near to being your rival."

"You became that, Count, I fancy, when a certain maid of honour in Dravstadt had also the bad taste not to look upon you with favour."

The smile on his face broadened, and he showed no sign of anger.

"A hit, Captain, I grant it. There we stand on level ground for a moment. Is there not a saying that in love and war all is fair? I have explained what you may gain; I do not shirk the consideration of what you lose. After all, Heselton, is it much you lose?"

"The woman I love, Count, and against that all gain is as nothing. No trickery of words can alter that fact."

"I will use no such trickery. Let us keep to facts. Has this lady given any proof that she loves you?"

"Yes," I answered promptly, but Heaven knows, I had small guarantee that I spoke the truth. But with this man neither dallying nor half measures would serve.

"Facts, I said, Captain. I think you answer a little hastily."

"We may easily come at the truth, Count; she can decide between us. Dare you stand the test?"

"It sounds a subterfuge, but I can only answer in one way," he returned. "Were we brothers in arms, yes; as it is, I must remember that I am a King and that such a test would not help me with regard to Princess Suzanne. Diplomacy and love must both be served. In the one I ask your help, and my hands surely hold rewards enough; for the other, it is certain that the lady will presently be my wife."

"Think you the nation will accept any Queen you choose to give it?"

"It has accepted me, it will accept her. Force shall help me, if persuasion will not."

"As your attempt to coerce me fails, so will your love," I answered.

He rose slowly from his chair, still no anger showing in his face, but the smile had given place to a grave expression.

"At least my mission ends — a failure seemingly. We shall meet once more, Captain Heselton, and it rests entirely with you whether that meeting shall be our last or not. Father Anthony is in Syere, I know not why, unless it be as your accomplice, and one of two offices he must presently perform. Either he shall marry you to the Princess, or help you make your peace with Heaven. To-night much wine has made some of us slow-witted; you have until noon to-morrow to decide."

"The farce is already over, Count; I have decided."

"Were it a farce we might laugh at the fall of the curtain; unfortunately, it is a tragedy."

"I have not begged my life of you," I said.

"I was thinking of the Princess," he answered.

I had risen, too, and we looked each other straight in the eyes.

"There is one other way out of the difficulty," he said slowly, "the death of the Princess."

"I believe Christian of Varna to be incapable of taking that way," I said.

"What Christian of Varna would not do, the King may find necessary."

There was silence for some moments.

"I would bargain with the King," I said. "Let him give me his word that the Princess shall go unharmed across the frontier, and he may deliver me to the tender mercies of the seneschal."

For a moment longer he looked into my eyes.

"The King makes no bargain, Captain Heselton, but he loves a man and would save him. There is one who may persuade you to reason. I will send her."

He made a sign to his companions and they followed him out of the room. I saw that men of the Guard were still in the corridor. It would seem that sleep was banished from Syere to-night.

I stood waiting by the table. My lady was surely coming to me. I should see her once more, perchance hold her in my arms for the first and the last time. Would she persuade me? Love — if she loved me —

would prompt her to save me from death. She might well make any promise to the Count to accomplish this — if she loved me. If not, what argument could she use to alter my decision? The prospect of her coming excited me, and drove all other thoughts out of my brain. Surely she must show me what was in her heart. My peril, to-morrow, nothing seemed to matter beside this. And if she loved me? A mad, unreasoning hope took possession of me, a hope that some way of escape would be opened, some miracle be wrought. Could all the grim walls of Syere hold love captive?

Then the key turned in the lock, the door slowly opened, and there entered, not my lady, but the Princess Suzanne.

CHAPTER XXII

A WOMAN'S LOVE

I THINK some relief was mingled with my disappointment that it was not my lady. The prospect of seeing her had excited me, yet there was some dread of the interview. What should I have said to her or she to me that could have made the position easier for either of us? The fantastic hopes of a moment ago, the thought that love could never be held prisoner, were as the pictures fashioned by driven clouds on a windy day, definite for one instant, chaos the next. Hope had shown me a vision, the coming of the Princess brought back reality.

She swept into the room in a scornful manner, her step firm, her head erect, not a word or a glance for those who waited in the corridor and bowed as she came. Something of the Count's designs she must know, thought possibly that she had been brought here to listen to the pleading of a coward who would seek to save his life no matter what the cost might be to others. She might well be prepared to treat me with disdain. I expected her wrath to be visited upon me, but as the door closed again, she stopped, a curious expression of questioning in her eyes. I remembered what the Count had

said of her. I remembered all my lady had said. There was a subtle change, the Princess seemed suddenly absorbed in the woman, and certainly I had never realised until this moment how beautiful she was. The thought in my mind must have become visible in my face for she smiled. It was strange she could smile at such a time.

"You visit a poor failure, Princess," I said.

"I do not come of my own will," she answered.

The words might sound ungracious, but there was pity in her voice.

"I know, Your Highness; the Count has been with me. I am outwitted, beaten, condemned. He might have spared you this interview."

"And doubtless you blame me. Had we made the attempt sooner we might —"

"Why hurt ourselves uselessly with regrets, Princess?"

"You must not think of me too bitterly, Captain Heselton," she returned. "There was more reason in my action than I could explain."

Why should I argue with her? If her whims had served to bring disaster, she was in as desperate a case as a woman could be.

"The past need no longer trouble us," I answered.

"But the future, Captain Heselton?"

"The future is hardly worth thinking about, Princess, so far as I am concerned. My adventure comes to an abrupt ending to-morrow — at noon;" and then fearful that she might suppose I was whining at my fate, I

added with a laugh: "Few men are able to speak with such certainty as I am."

She came slowly to the table by which I was standing, but she ignored the chair I placed for her. She stood close to me, facing me, and I wondered what I should have done had it been my lady standing there. Should I have dared to take her in my arms and pour out my soul to her?

"Tell me what the Count has said to you; Captain Heselton."

"What purpose can it serve, Princess?"

"Are we not both prisoners?" she returned. "May we not speak openly to each other?"

"Enough that I do not buy my life at the price the Count demands for it."

"Captain Heselton, will you forget for a little while that I am a Princess, and remember only that I am a woman — just a woman. What price does the Count demand?" and her hand touched my arm as she asked the question.

"Surely he has told you, else why has he sent you here?"

"I think you know how I hate Christian of Varna," she answered. "A woman does not trust the man she hates. I ask you to tell me."

"Princess —"

"Tell it to the woman, Captain Heselton."

"That he may hold his throne securely, the Count would load me with honours to make me a fitting bridegroom for a Princess," I answered. "He would turn a

Captain of horse into a pinchbeck prince and force you to marry him."

"A wonderful scheme," she said; "the man's demand for the woman's submission to his will with no care how his end may be obtained. What poor, weak fools men must think us."

"On my honour, not a word of this scheme was breathed to me," I went on, for I would not have her think me in any way a party to so mean a plan. "I believed that the letter he wrote to you was genuine, that he had come to Syere to win you if he could. Not until to-night, at the banquet, did I understand what he intended to do."

"And how did you answer him, Captain Heselton?"

"You may guess, Princess, since you find me still a prisoner."

I would not have her know how scornful had been my rejection of the proposal. She might reasonably resent the manner of it as an insult to her womanhood. Heaven knows, no such thought had been in my mind. To love one woman, means to have a reverence for all women, just because they are women; at least it had come to be so with me.

"I would I had heard you and could have watched your face," she said slowly.

I seemed to hear again the glass smashing to atoms on the stone floor, and to see the faces turned towards me. I was glad she had not been there to watch me.

"With Christian of Varna one must use direct words, Princess, or he may trick you."

"He, too, can be direct enough," she said. "He came to me before the banquet."

"With threats?" I asked.

"He would not say so, nor, to do him justice, did he use any. I gave him no reason to use threats."

I think I expected her to go on speaking, to tell me what the Count had said to her, to explain why he had had no reason to use threats, but she stopped suddenly, her eyes fixed on mine. It was a foolish speculation, but again I was wondering how much I should have dared had she been my lady. Mentally, I was replacing one beautiful woman with another, subconsciously substituting other lines of face and form for those before me.

"Do you know why he had no reason to threaten?" she asked.

"Why, Princess?"

I asked the question mechanically when I already knew the answer. I could doubt no longer, perhaps only a fool would have doubted so long. Now the knowledge came sharply and swiftly as the lightning stroke which in a moment scars the tree from the top to the bottom. I was scarred, even as the tree; almost I felt as one branded. Shame was in me; I think the scarlet of it flamed in my cheeks. Colour was in the face of the Princess, too, warm, glowing colour, no shame in it at all, only an added glory to her beauty.

"Because — because I was not angry at what he proposed to do, but glad — glad. Help me to say it. Help me, please."

Was ever man in such a case as I? It was not pity that she felt for me, but love.

"Princess —" and then I stopped. I had no words to answer her. In some measure, at least, I could realise her position.

"Is it for me to break down the barrier between us?" she said; "is that the penalty I have to pay? It would be strange if such a woman as I am had not seen the admiration in men's eyes, the tribute that men must pay to a woman to whom has been given something of what the world calls beauty. Why should I pretend to ignorance when I cannot help knowing that I have received the gift? Out of such admiration, love grows. I do not doubt that men have loved me, many who have not dared to tell me so. Such admiration may compel love, too; may call forth love in answer; yet no such answer have I been compelled to until now. Have I not seen admiration in your eyes, Captain Heselton?"

"Yes, Princess, but —"

"And I have answered it," she said, "so I was glad at the Count's proposal."

I felt a fool and was dumb.

"There shall be a future for us, a great future. I think you cannot know how the love of a woman may fill the life of a man. Few men ever come to that knowledge. You shall take from Christian of Varna all he can give you; and from me — myself."

For a moment there was silence. I had not the courage to look at her.

"What can I say, Princess? How can I make you understand?"

"Are words needed?" she asked. "I do not put my love into words, nor can I tell how or when it came to me. Suddenly it was with me, making me count the hours until your coming, and I knew that for me the whole world had changed. Nor can I show my love as I long to reveal it to you. That must take all time from now to death — and beyond; something new every hour, the constant touching of some deeper depth until we shall learn that there is no plummet line that can reach to the end of love. Love is infinite. I think only a woman knows that."

"Princess, I am a lover. All this I know. It has come to me unsought, but — but it is for another woman."

Brutal, yes it was brutal, but how else could I answer her? To speak such words made me feel a cur. It was like flinging an insult in her face, but the cruelty was surely the greatest kindness. Feeling my own position keenly, I could feel hers. I would stop her saying more. Her anger would be far easier to face than her love.

But she was not angry. She was silent for a few moments, and then she said quietly:

"My maid of honour?"

"Yes," I answered.

She spread out her arms a little, an appeal that seemed to cut into my manhood as the loaded thong of a task-master's whip cuts into the quivering flesh of a slave. That appeal was one great question. Why? Why

should my love be for another woman when her whole soul cried out for it? What had this other woman more than she possessed? Were not her eyes as bright, her hair as soft, her lips as tempting as hers? All this was asked in that silent appeal and I had no words to answer it.

"Has she come to you as I do?" she said, her voice little more than a whisper. "Has she bared her soul to you as I have done? Has she shown you the hidden depths of love as I am showing them?"

"No."

"If she loved, she must have done so by word, or sign, or by that silence which may be more eloquent than all else. Think. Think. Even if she could love as I do, even if such love were possible for you, what could it bring but perplexity, difficulty, sorrow?"

"I only know that I love her, Princess."

"And hate me?" she asked.

"No. I reverence you. Believe me, the one thing I realise more than all else is your courage, the courage that can speak as you have done. To my life's end, whether that end come in hours or years, I shall always reverence you, and thank God that such a woman found something in me that was worthy. I would my love could answer yours, that I could rejoice at the breaking of the barrier between us, but no man, nor woman either, can love at will or command. We are prisoners in a double sense, prisoners within these walls, and captives of circumstance as well. Friendship, will you not take that since love I cannot give? God knows, such friend-

ship as I offer is the nearest akin to love that friendship ever was. See, on my knee, I humbly thank you, not as a Princess, but with the homage of a man to a woman. Pardon me, and give me your hands in friendship."

She stood perfectly straight and still. Her hands were not held out to me. I had done what I could to make her burden lighter and to ease my own. Slowly I rose from my knee.

"By noon to-morrow. The Count has given you until then?"

"Yes."

"And afterwards, death?"

"That is what I look for."

"Is the sacrifice worthy?"

"I have not thought of it as a sacrifice, Princess. It is the penalty of failure. I pay the debt, that is all."

"Is it all?" she asked.

I remembered what Varna had said, how he had spoken of another way out of the difficulty.

"Will your death help my maid of honour?" she said. "Is she not at the Count's mercy? Can your death win freedom for her? Better give your friendship to her and bid her marry Christian of Varna. She will at least find safety and honour."

A little hardness had come into her voice. It was natural. I could understand something of the immense strain under which she was living these moments.

"She will not marry the Count," I said.

"She will. Even if she has given you some passing thought, she will easily forget a dead man."

"I think you do her some injustice, Princess."

"If you will make a sacrifice —"

"I have said it is not sacrifice," I answered.

"You have offered me friendship. May there not be room for sacrifice in friendship? Have you considered my position after this interview?"

I turned to her quickly.

"For me it is also death, Captain Heselton. How else could Christian of Varna be safe?"

"He will not do that. I have —"

"Pleaded for me?" she asked, something of scorn in her voice for the first time. "There is only one way to save me, and that way you refuse to take."

"I cannot."

"A strange friendship."

"Princess —"

"Oh, I have no more fear of death than you have, Captain Heselton. Indeed, I think there is a hope in your mind that noon to-morrow will not see the end, that some miracle will open a door to you, and that you will go forth presently to love and happiness."

I did not answer her. There was anger in her tone now. It was far easier to listen to than her love.

"A few words to the Count and I can make your love more hopeless than ever."

"Princess, I am past threatening."

She was silent for a moment, and Heaven alone could know what struggle was raging within her.

"Love scorned turns to hate," she said slowly.

"There has been no scorn, Princess."

"And I cannot hate," she said, "but no other shall have what I covet. I have told you of love, would you know the evil that is in me?"

"I shall not believe in the evil."

"Believe it or not, it is there. You shall have full confession. I fear a miracle which may open some door to you, therefore I will make sure that you shall give to no other that which you deny to me. You shall find no happiness the way you have looked for it. I can whisper something to the Count which shall make that impossible, even though a miracle should set you free. I have it in my power to save my life and to destroy you."

"Then, Princess, I beseech you use this power. Since you will be safe, I have no dread of noon to-morrow."

Her words, spoken in a low tone, were angrily spoken. God knows I thought no ill of her for that. She had passed through an ordeal which few women are called upon to experience. Indeed, it was a relief to me to see her anger, and an intense satisfaction to know that she could save herself. There was that in her manner which convinced me that she spoke the truth. What her secret was that should so move the Count, I could not guess; and surely nothing she might do or say could render my case more hopeless.

For an instant it seemed that she would make one more passionate appeal to me, but she controlled herself and crossed the room quickly.

"The interview may end," she said. "You lose much, Captain Heselton."

"Much, indeed," I answered.

She paused, turning from the door to look at me, expecting me to say more.

"I had hoped you would leave your friendship with me. Will you not do so?"

She struck the door sharply with her fist, and it opened immediately.

"Take me at once to the Count."

"I think he has retired, Your Highness," said the officer.

"Then rouse him quickly. I have news for him that shall make him thank you for disturbing him."

Then the door was shut again, bolts shot home and the key was turned in the lock. I was alone, should be left alone probably until near noon to-morrow. Then Father Anthony might come to help me make my peace with Heaven. It was a strange irony that he should be the one to do me such a service. The candles had not been removed; it was something to have light. My peace with Heaven. It was difficult to concentrate my thoughts in this direction, so many things of the world took hold upon me. It was a relief that the Princess had gone. I experienced a sense of escape from difficulty. Some contentment came, too, the loosening of strain, restfulness. My labours, worthy or not, were over, finished. There was no more need to scheme and plan. I could be idle and dream. To-morrow — to-morrow at noon. The end would come then, but I had no fear of it. I hardly thought of it. I suppose a reaction had set in after days of great strain and insufficient sleep. I

seemed curiously detached from everything that concerned me most vitally. A blank was in my brain. Presently I touched the little gray shoe in my tunic and drew it out. How strangely it had preserved me that night in Dravstadt. What was my lady doing at this moment? Was she thinking of me, I wondered. Yet still my ideas were detached. The shoe slipped from my hands and fell to the floor. I must not lose it. I picked it up and put it in my tunic again. Perhaps my lady was not in Syere to-night. Perhaps O'Connell —

I must have slipped low in the chair as sleep overcame me, for my next conscious effort was of struggling to drag myself out of some deep hole into which I had fallen, while a voice was urging me to hurry.

“Quickly! Quickly!”

A hand touched me.

Then I awoke and staggered to my feet, almost like a man who has suddenly won free from the crush of a fight. Standing before me was the little kitchen maid.

“Come, sir, come. Every moment counts to-night.”

I only awoke thoroughly as I followed her across the room, to a corner of it hung with tapestry. Here the tapestry rested in folds upon the floor in such a way as to suggest that it had not been hung high enough, but now it was flung aside and showed that a piece of the stonework was missing, a right angular piece, part wall, part floor. The hole I looked into was black, uninviting as a vault, and a chill breath of air struck upwards from it, fluttering the hangings on the wall.

“There is a light below,” said the child. “The lad-

der is on this side; your foot will touch the top of it at once. Go first. I must follow because I know how to close the trap."

Without a word I put my foot upon the ladder which was clamped perpendicularly to the wall, and went down slowly. A miracle had happened. There had opened for me a way of escape.

CHAPTER XXIII

SENTRY O'CONNELL

A DESCENT of a dozen rungs of the ladder, twelve feet down or thereabouts, and I was standing at the entrance of a narrow passage cut in the thickness of the walls. The opening above was sharply defined against the dim candle-light in the room I had left. I saw the girl step on to the ladder, come down three or four rungs, then pause. Her upstretched arm drew the tapestry, which had been flung out of its position, into place again, there followed a low rolling sound ending with a slight thud, and then there was blackness. The mechanism of the trap must have worked easily, for the child had no great strength.

The next moment she was beside me.

"Shall I go first, sir?"

"Not if there is danger ahead."

"There is none yet."

I let her go and followed her, my hand touching her shoulder; but there was no chance of missing the way. The passage must have run as straight as a ruled line, but with a slightly downward trend, and it was only a matter of inches between my shoulders and either wall.

"There is a door here," said my guide.

She pulled it open, no key was necessary, and we came to a chamber into which a feeble light found entrance, so feeble, indeed, that the place might have seemed quite dark but for the blackness through which we had passed.

"This way, and tread carefully," said the girl. "It is full of rubbish."

A twisting alley way, between stacking of timber, it seemed to me, brought us to the further end of a long chamber, low-pitched, and without even a grating so far as I could see — a dungeon turned into a wood store. I did not understand the light until we were clear of the stacking. This end of the chamber was free from rubbish, and upon the floor near the opposite wall was a horn lantern. It was lifted up at the very moment that I noticed it. Only then did I understand that my guide and I were no longer alone. The dim light revealed a figure which puzzled me for a moment.

"You!" I exclaimed.

Only in a vague fashion had I realised that I was out of my prison, that I was treading a path to freedom. I had so definitely decided that I had come to the end of my adventures, that nothing could save me from the finality of to-morrow's noon, it was impossible to readjust myself at once to the altered conditions. Yet I knew in this moment, by the sudden fear which came to me, how great were the hopes new-born in me. It was the page who had caught up the lantern. He was dressed exactly as he had been that night when we journeyed from Dravstadt, the same heavy cloak was

wrapped about him. Was he not the Count's spy? If he were to have a hand in my escape, he was likely to deceive me and bring me to disaster.

"You!" I said, going close to him. "Where have you hidden yourself since we came to Syere?"

The lantern was slowly raised until the dim light of it fell full upon his face. More closely still I looked into those eyes.

"You?" and this time I spoke in a whisper.

"Yes, Captain Heselton, it is I."

It was my lady. In my face, or in some sudden movement, she must have understood what a multitude of questions I had to ask.

"There is no time to explain now," she said. "Danger is in every moment of delay. How long is it since the Princess left you?"

"I cannot tell. I fell asleep."

"Come at once."

"The lantern, is it safe to show a light?"

"Necessary for the present."

"Wait," I said. "Turn it towards this corner for a moment."

Some stout pieces of wood had been thrown down there and I chose one to serve as a cudgel.

"They took away my sword to-night," I said in explanation.

Without a word, my lady led the way into the darkness of a passage which opened from this end of the room. I was as a man in a pleasant dream who knows nothing of the waking to realities which must come presently. I

was thinking of the youth who had ridden beside me on the journey from Dravstadt, remembering scraps of our conversation, recalling some of the thoughts which had then passed through my mind. In a vague way I wondered why I had not recognised my lady. The night had been too dark to see her face, and the heavy collar of her cloak had been fastened closely, but her voice — she must have spoken differently then, or perchance I did not know the tones of her voice so well as I knew them now. How could I? Fever and forgetfulness had quickly followed that interview in the round room. It was that night on the tower, under the full moon, that I had come to know her as she really was. Yet, was my knowledge so complete even now? Was she any more my lady to-night than she was that afternoon when she had come by mistake into the barrack yard? No definite answer came to the question, but I was content because she was near me. The fact was enough, I was not concerned with the reason. Nor was I very observant of the way we went. Since the little kitchen maid was with us, doubtless we should come to that secret door presently, and then journey through the forest to freedom. Just now I was incapable of making any great mental effort. My nerves were still relaxed. Had danger come in these few minutes, I believe, mentally and physically, I should have been unprepared to meet it. Had I not been dreaming, I might have wondered why it was not the kitchen maid who led the way instead of my lady; as it was, I followed the dim, dancing light,

not listening for danger, not conscious how far or how long we travelled.

We came to a halt suddenly. A screen of planks blocked our way.

"You may move this piece of wood, Captain Heselton," said my lady. "Do it quietly, but do not take a step forward."

The plank was easily shifted aside, and as I moved it my lady covered the lantern with her cloak.

"Listen!" she said.

The command roused me. I began to wake and think.

"It is not likely we shall be discovered here, but caution is necessary," she said. "See, Captain Heselton, the builders of Syere were wise. They were determined that in a time of siege the castle should not lack water."

She had taken one step through the opening, and now held the lantern low. Before us the open mouth of a well yawned wide, and seemed to whisper of enormous depth. Across the circle two planks were thrown.

"No one would guess there was a passage beyond the well," she said. "Come."

She crossed the boards, walking firmly; the kitchen maid followed quickly, with a little shudder, I thought; then I passed over, not without a thought of the frail planks which held me, and the horrible death which might come to a traveller this way.

"For that the lantern was necessary, but we must not use it any more," said my lady, and the next moment

we were in darkness. "Give me your hand, Captain Heselton, and give your other to the child. The way is intricate."

Truly it was; turnings to right and left, a few steps upward, then a step downwards, the passage so narrow in places that there was barely room for a full-grown man to pass. Even my lady went slowly, but was never in doubt which direction to take. The distance we travelled was not great, and we came into a small room, the scent of old wine in it.

"A cellar," said my lady, "and the real beginning of our peril. The steps here run up to a door opening on to a passage which leads to the main hall. We have to cross to the dungeon entrance, and after that this child must pilot us. Though I have found secret ways in Syere, I know no way out of it."

I was awake now, alive, tense, ready in nerve and muscle. I led the way up the stairs, gripping my cudgel and wishing most fervently it was a sword I had in my hand. We crept in single file along the wall of the passage, towards a sharp turn in it, from which point we should be able to see into the hall. I knew where I was now. The moment we had reached the door at the top of the stairs a murmur of sound was in our ears, distant, the undertone of a place full of life. Evidently there was not much thought of sleep in the castle to-night. Possibly they were still drinking in the banqueting hall.

I stopped short before we reached the turning. Some of our enemies had no intention of passing the night over their wine. There was a sudden clatter of feet

upon the stairs, and the sound of voices coming nearer. We could neither see nor be seen, but danger was very close to us.

"Truly I was born under a lucky star. Could anything have happened better?"

It was the Count who spoke, and laughter came with the question.

"Sir, we shall set the bells ringing in Dravstadt before noon to-morrow," was the answer.

"Ay, there must be no sparing of the spurs to-night," said the Count. "Is not the Princess delightful, gentlemen? You must have the news running through Dravstadt without delay."

"By to-morrow's noon," was the answer.

"In your good humour, sir, do not forget there will also be a noon to-morrow in Syere," someone said.

"You bring a cloud over me," said the Count.

"It will disperse to-morrow."

"Life bubbles so joyously in me to-night that I hate the very thought of death."

"Death is a necessary evil, sir."

"The devil is in the fool," the Count exclaimed.

"And I think there is only one way to exorcise him," the man replied.

I could not doubt that I was the fool; I wondered who was so persistent that I should not escape death.

"To saddle, gentlemen, and good speed to you," said the Count, and then after a pause, during which two or three men passed through the entrance into the courtyard, he went on: "Plague take this fellow Heselton."

"You cannot —" but the voice was lowered so that I could not catch what was said.

"Let to-morrow care for itself," said the Count. "To-night, I only want to dream of love which sparkles high in the cup; and there is Father Anthony yonder aching to say a blessing over it. You shall, Father, and quickly."

"Indeed, sir, it cannot be too soon," said the priest.

"Till then let us make hours into minutes," returned the Count, "each man to his own method, wine, song, laughter, or whatever he will. For my part I am inclined to lose a little of the time in sleep — if love will allow it."

He crossed the hall and went up the stairs laughing like a happy man, indeed, more like a careless boy who, newly freed from the discipline of school, finds the world an excellent place, full of promise. What new development was there in his schemes that he should send to the capital in such haste at this hour? The Princess had gone straight to him from me; what had she said to put him in such good humour?

"Come," I said half turning to my lady when the footsteps had died away on the stairs, "escape is not likely to be easier than it is at this moment."

I knew this passage well. From the end of it only a corner of the hall had to be crossed to reach the door which shut off the stairs leading down to the dungeons. This door was of no particular solidity, and since I had been at Syre had not been locked. There were no prisoners below. Had it been fastened to-night? The fear

was in my mind as we crept to the corner, and then, when I could look into the hall, I stopped again. The door was closed, whether it was locked or not I could not tell, but on a stool beside it sat a sentry — O'Connell. I gripped my cudgel. It must be our lives or his. I trusted that he had filled himself with wine to-night and that he would soon doze at his post. At the moment, he seemed particularly alert.

"Go quickly," whispered my lady.

"But the sentry?"

"He knows. He is a friend and is waiting for us."

I could not believe it. I was turning to argue the point when she touched my arm quickly, and I looked back into the hall. Father Anthony had returned and was slowly crossing towards O'Connell.

"A lonely watch," he said.

"Yes, Father."

We were close enough to hear clearly every word they said, although their voices were low-pitched.

"I'll keep you company," said the priest.

"Sure, I'd be in bed myself if I could," said O'Connell. "It's the best place at this hour."

"I am never so wide awake as when the rest of the world is sleeping," was the answer. "It is then that the mind is keenest. Is that door locked?"

"No, and why should it be? There are only ghosts in the dungeons."

"It should be locked," said the priest.

I watched his hatchet face, but there was as much chance of understanding his thoughts as of reading a

language in cabalistic signs without the key. Something he must suspect, and did not trust the Irishman. He would be sentry himself. He intended to remain there. I forgot my distrust of O'Connell and wondered whether he was alive to the situation.

"Where would be the good of locking such a flimsy door?" said O'Connell. "Why, I'd break it in with a kick. There's one at the bottom of the steps that is a door, bolts on it thick as my arm, and shot home, too. Do you think I'd be sitting here so comfortably if I thought the ghosts could get loose, Father?"

"I wasn't thinking of ghosts, my son."

"And you don't know the dungeons, Father. Come and see that door below, and what a devil of a dwelling it is down there."

I was no longer in doubt. O'Connell realised the situation as well as I did. Once below, the priest would not play the sentry any more to-night.

"I'll take your word," was the answer.

"Come, Father, satisfy your curiosity and do good besides. There are restless ghosts yonder, I warrant, to whom a prayer might bring peace. The old walls below hold the moaning and the crying of many a poor wretch who has dragged along the weary road to death between them. You're not afraid, are you, Father Anthony?"

There was quite a pleading tone in O'Connell's voice, but the priest was not to be cajoled.

"They have waited so long for such a prayer, they

may well wait a little longer," he said, the shadow of a grim smile upon his face.

O'Connell had stood up when he suggested a visit to the dungeons, now he moved the stool and placed it at the priest's service.

"If you are to come on sentry duty, you will get tired of standing, Father. It is a game one has to get used to."

"Thank you. I will sit for a little."

"In the open, there's the wind and the rain and the cold to keep a man awake, but here one might doze easily. Shall I rouse you if you fall asleep?"

"I shall not sleep."

O'Connell leaned against the wall beside the door. He had so placed the stool that the priest was a little in front of him.

"There will be a hanging to-morrow," said Father Anthony after a pause.

"Sure, that's a pity. Who's to hang?"

"Captain Heselton."

"Hanging, is it? I thought perhaps they would kill him some other way."

"Hanging is as good as any other."

"True," said O'Connell, "it means death and that's the chief thing. I suppose the Captain deserves it."

"We are not his judges."

"There's consolation in that. Poor devil! You should be with him, Father, sentry to his soul to-night."

The priest looked at him quickly.

"Ay, for once in a way it's teaching you your duty I am."

"If the chance offered, would you help him?" asked the priest.

"Sure, if it's tempting me you are, I shall call for help."

O'Connell's indignation was so genuine, I wondered whether he was to be trusted. Father Anthony seemed impressed.

"He might attempt to escape."

"Much good that would do him. Has anyone ever escaped from Syere?"

"Captain Heselton might succeed."

"With you and me watching the way out?" said O'Connell pointing to the great doors of the hall.

For a few moments they were silent, and then Father Anthony suddenly stood up. Whether his keen eyes had caught sight of us at the bend in the passage, or whether some movement of O'Connell's behind him made him suspicious, I shall never know; but in another instant they were locked together, the Irishman's arm about the priest's throat to prevent his calling. O'Connell may have realised the danger suddenly, or his action may have been determined upon before the priest stood up, but one thing was clear to me, our time had come.

"Now," I whispered.

Even as we crossed the hall, a yell startled the echoes. So fierce and shrill was it that it must have penetrated into far distant corners of the castle. For all O'Connell's strength, the priest had succeeded in freeing him-

self sufficiently to call for help, a triumph of will over muscle. The answer came promptly in the quick sound of hurrying feet and a rush of men upon the stairs. I think O'Connell's design had been to treat his adversary as lightly as possible, perchance his gentleness had contributed to his failure; now he was a desperate man and flung the priest so violently from him that he fell sprawling on the floor, and lay there.

With a quick movement O'Connell kicked open the door.

"There's time," he shouted to encourage us. Secrecy and silence could be of service no longer, for our enemies had already reached the hall.

My lady and the girl had passed through the door before the rush was upon us.

"Now for the honour of the family, Captain," cried O'Connell, and the first man to reach us was hurled back amongst his fellows, throwing them into confusion for a moment. Then we were struggling for our lives.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HONOUR OF THE FAMILY

CAN the history of a few crowded moments be told precisely? Is it possible to explain how I lived to tell this history at all? Providence intervenes when a man's condition is most desperate, and truly, Providence is kind to some very worthless fellows. Few have greater reason to be sure of this than I.

Most of our enemies were bent on taking us alive, thinking no doubt this would please the Count better than our deaths, and their carefulness helped us. Moments they were, a short measure by the clock, though I lived long in them; and out of the confusion, a nightmare seen through bloodshot eyes, some incidents stand out clearly, and are cut sharply and for all time into my brain as though they were the work of some cunning etcher.

Not all our enemies showed care for our lives. As the first man to rush upon us was hurled back by O'Connell, a huge figure was upon me. It was the giant Italian, and he grunted with satisfaction as he came. I was surprised, almost startled, by his courage. I had always felt that he might stab me in the back if he had the opportunity, but I had never expected him to attack

me face to face. The man was a butcher, not a soldier. It was then I realised that I had only a cudgel in my hand, and the Italian's sudden valour was explained. Nothing will so certainly rouse a desperate man as a knowledge of his disadvantage. It is all or nothing for him. He must seize the opportune moment or fail altogether, there can be no second chance. Could the giant have looked into my mind at that moment, I think he would have hesitated, but he saw only the cudgel and an easy victory. Steel against a stick made him careless. His malicious eyes told the thought that was in him. Possibly I did the unexpected and he believed I was afraid. I hardly took an attitude of defence, made no attempt to fight, but slipping aside to avoid his thrust, brought my cudgel swinging down upon his wrist. It was a stout cudgel, and his wrist snapped like the breaking of a dry twig. He let out a yell which gave pause to some of those about him, and as he staggered back, his weapon fell from his useless fingers. So it was I came by a sword.

The Italian fled across the hall howling, and for a moment there was a space between us and our enemies. In that space Father Anthony still lay where he had fallen, no one taking any heed of him, though he moved a little as if he were recovering consciousness; and near him another man had collapsed into a heap from O'Connell's point and was ominously still and silent.

"Go. I'll follow," whispered my companion.

Perhaps the whispered words were heard, for there was another rush, and other men were hurrying down

the stairs and across the hall. I was conscious of quick thrust and parry, and the soft resistance of flesh to my point, and then I was through the door, retreating backwards. The flight of stairs which led down to the first dungeons had only a single turn in it and was wide enough for three men to walk abreast. The retreat once begun, there was no stopping, the pressure must drive us down; but those who came first were none too eager to rush upon our points, and for their own safety strove to hold those behind them from pushing them forward too precipitously. O'Connell and I were able to keep our feet to the foot of these stairs. Here was a landing or lobby, passages to the dungeons leading from it, and in one corner was the narrow circular stairway which led down to those lower places of darkness and horrible suggestion.

"We are here," whispered my lady. She and the maid were evidently at the head of these stairs, but we could not see them. Even at noon, little daylight found its way here, and the night had not yet gone.

"Down with you," cried O'Connell. "We shall hold them here and give you time."

"Go quickly," I said.

Then came the second incident which is deeply etched into my brain. We fought in the dark at the foot of the stairs, sound alone telling us when our weapons got home. A faint glimmer of light came down the stairs from the hall above, giving us the advantage, for our foes were silhouetted against it, while we could not be seen. Then some of those behind, having procured lan-

terns, passed them over the heads of their fellows to those below. Now we could be seen, but my lady and the girl had gone. O'Connell and I were retreating to the head of the circular staircase when, by the lantern which first reached the landing, I saw a man rush forward and fling himself upon O'Connell. By the guttural cry he gave, I knew it was Max. The Irishman had got his wish for one glorious moment with the German.

To the end of my days I shall remember O'Connell, for I know all I owe to him. I was at the head of the stairs when Max made his rush, and the two men, locked together, effectually stopped the others coming at me in the narrow limits of that lobby. O'Connell seemed to understand this.

"Now is your time, Captain. It is the family tie."

I did not move. Though I knew my lady waited below, I must stay.

"Go," he said again, gasping out the short word as he fought. But I did not move. Down those stairs O'Connell and I must go together.

After he had called to me, I believe the Irishman forgot all about me, in the strenuous joy of this fight. I do not think he remembered any more the crowded moments which had passed, nor the circumstances which had occasioned them; I believe he was only conscious of the fierce struggle in which he was engaged. He did not speak, nor did Max. They were well-matched animals fighting for the mastery, the great hazard of life and death between them. Max had no sword, only a dagger, and

this was in his favour, for they were so locked together that a sword was useless. Whether O'Connell had succeeded in snapping his sword on purpose, or whether it broke accidentally, I do not know, but after the first few seconds, he was fighting with only a foot or so of his blade left. It was impossible for me to help him, as it was impossible for the others to give Max any assistance. The two men turned and twisted with such lightning rapidity that a helping thrust was as likely to reach friend as foe. Watchful, I stood by the steps waiting for the moment when I could help, if the need came; and I was watchful, too, of the enemies who for the moment could not attack me. Almost it seemed that, by common consent, the battle was to be decided by this single combat. There was no gauging of time. I cannot tell how long the struggle lasted; I only knew it grew fiercer every moment, that never for an instant did they cease to turn and twist, arms slashing and stabbing at each other; and the hot grunts of the combat came now from O'Connell, now from his enemy. Twisting as they were, they fought in a small space, never getting away from the head of the stairs. It may be that O'Connell thought I had gone and was bent on preventing anyone from following me. The end came with startling suddenness. Somebody must have held up a lantern, I fancy, and at that moment both men seemed to strike together, finality in the blows. I think I knew the end had come and was prepared for another rush, ready, too, to protect the Irishman who might easily be attacked before he could recover himself. Max's

head jerked backwards, as a runner's will sometimes at the moment of his culminating exertion. I believed the Irishman had succeeded, and expected to see his enemy fall away from him; but in that instant a groan, or rather a deep sigh, came from O'Connell, and I saw the hilt of the dagger sticking from his throat. The men were still locked together, gripped in death, and together they fell back upon me. Had not the narrow stairway been circular, I should have been flung downwards in a heap; as it was, I swung round the walls, tottering to keep my feet down a score or more of steps, and after me, falling and slithering from stair to stair, came O'Connell and Max, until they were jammed and caught and lay crosswise, blocking the way. So it was that the Irishman and I came down those stairs together.

"O'Connell! O'Connell!"

I think I knew that I was calling into ears deaf for all time. There can be no escape from death when a dagger is driven home in this fashion. Friend and foe were both dead.

Quick movements were on the steps above me, a glimmer of light upon the walls — and my lady waited. For a few moments, at least, the way was blocked. By his death, O'Connell might have saved us, and I sprang down the remaining steps eager to seize the advantage.

"Which way?" I said.

"This," answered the child.

"Quickly, then."

We plunged into the darkness of a passage, hands

joined, saying no word as we hurried over the uneven floor.

If my lady's safety was all I thought of for a while, if I forgot for a time the man whose death had been our salvation, surely I may be pardoned. Worse than bloodhounds were behind us, men used to savagery in thought and action, men beaten and thwarted, men who feared the anger of Christian of Varna. Little mercy could we expect from them if we were caught. Was it wonderful that the present filled my mind to the exclusion of all else?

Not a word did we speak. To right and left the child led us, a tortuous path, and so intricate that my mind was full of misgivings. Was it possible she could be certain of the way in the dark? She never hesitated, and we left our enemies behind us. They had forced their way past that gruesome barrier on the stairs, they were in the passages, and had lanterns to help them; but it was evident they were uncertain of their direction. We could hear them shouting to one another, quarrelling and cursing. They thought we were merely hiding and were looking for us in every corner, and in the dungeons. Some, by their shouts, evidently imagined there might be a way of escape, but others ridiculed the idea. They would find us, it was only a question of time. Doubtless German Max had known the way to this secret door since he was a friend of the seneschal who had probably escaped this way from Syere, but Max was dead. Where was the seneschal? The thought made me more eager to be quickly at our journey's end. At any mo-

ment he might arrive to act as guide to our enemies. Another fear was in my brain. Would the key fit the lock? Fashioned from an impression, it was so likely to be wrong in some particular, a small thing perhaps, easily altered, but it would be enough to destroy us.

My feet were suddenly treading upon dry leaves; the crackling sound seemed strangely loud in this confined place. Still, the child hurried forward for a little way.

"The door," she said stopping abruptly. "Do you feel it?"

She took my hand and put my fingers on the lock.

"Here is the key."

I do not suppose a doubt concerning the key entered her head, but it was with a hand trembling with excitement that I fitted it into the lock. No doubt I did it clumsily, for when I attempted to turn it, it would not move. An awful despair gripped my heart.

"Doesn't it fit?" asked my lady so calmly that she checked my agitation.

I did not answer, for the key slipped into its right position and turned easily.

"Straight down the sloping ground into the woods," said the child. "No sentry will be here to see you. Leave the key in the lock, sir; I will shut the door after you."

"Leave the key in the lock!" I exclaimed.

"We must lock it on the outside," said my lady.

"No," answered the child decidedly. "I will lock it on the inside. I am going no further with you."

"You must."

"No, no, my lady. You are dressed as a man. From the walls, if they chance to see you, they will not think that a woman has escaped. My dress might betray you. If they reach this door by chance they will find it locked and know that no one has gone this way. For hours and hours they will hunt through these passages and you will have time to reach safety."

"You cannot stay," I said. "Those men behind —"

"They will not find me. I know of many places where I can hide. I am not afraid. No one will suspect a kitchen maid. I shall have the key. Some day soon I will run away from Syere, and find you, my lady, if God wills."

"You shall come now," I said, thrusting out my arm to grasp her wrist.

"No."

The refusal was sharply spoken, just as I had heard her utter it before. My hand did not touch her. She was gone, had darted back into the darkness of the passage. We both called to her softly, but there was no answer. What could we do?

"We must go," said my lady.

I think she said it to relieve me of the responsibility of leaving the child behind.

Quietly I opened the door. It was screened by one of those creepers which clung to the old walls in places, and at some time, no doubt, the lower portion of the creeper had been thinned and partly cut away to clear the door, which opened inwards.

Slantwise, the creeper fell towards the wall, clinging to

it a foot or so above the doorway, leaving just sufficient room for a man to slip out. One might have passed the place constantly without a suspicion that any door was there, so cunningly was it concealed.

I went first, my lady following me closely. The naked sword was still in my hand, ready for quick use. Some sentry might be there on this occasion. I had pulled the door to, and as we moved away, the key was turned in the lock. The child had her way and remained in Syere.

From the shelter of the creeper I looked at the way we must go. The slope pitched sharply from the castle walls to the woods below which, in straggling fashion, ran a little way up the rising ground. Coarse grass, with here and there a stunted bush and patches of scrub, covered the slope right up to the walls.

Not long since, the first light of the dawn must have shown low in the east, and a dim light, gray and cold, gave a touch of mystery to the world before us. As in a thin mist the woods were half hidden, and the rugged walls of Syere lifted up gaunt and shapeless masses which seemed cloudlike and ethereal above our heads. The whole world seemed empty and dead, no sound in it; and my lady and I were as adventurers breaking into the unknown.

As I stepped free of the creeper, a stunted bush near the wall seemed to take life suddenly. Hands grasped me, and a laugh, half suppressed, was in my ear. The next moment came a smothered cry of consternation, smothered because my fingers gripped tightly to stay its

full articulation. I had a man by the throat — the seneschal. How he came to be watching there; why, since he thought this way might be used, he had not had it guarded within, I cannot say. Probably he had hoped to secure a personal triumph by doing something which would specially recommend him to the Count. Of one thing I am certain, he only expected to have a woman to deal with. He knew I was safe, but no doubt his suspicions had been aroused with regard to my lady. He thought it possible she might know of this secret door, and believed, if she came at all, she would come alone. Thank heaven, he had taken this means of capturing her; had he spoken of his suspicion, either that secret door could never have been reached, or we should have opened it only to walk into the midst of enemies.

He was a rat in my hands, no muscle in him at all, and possibly long hours of waiting had stiffened his limbs and robbed him of what little strength and courage he possessed. He was powerless to utter a sound as I gripped his throat, and I might have been holding a stuffed doll, so loose and disjointed was he. I think this was why I did not run my sword through him; to kill such a worm seemed unworthy work for a man. But he must not betray us, so I struck his head with my sword hilt to knock the sense out of him, and flung him away. He went rolling down the slope, bounding a little where the ground was more uneven, and then pitched forward into a ditch at the edge of the wood.

I held out my hand to my lady, and we went down quickly. As we gained the wood I looked back at

Syere. Even in these few moments the light had grown stronger. I could discern the battlements, but no shouting came to show that we had been seen.

"Come. We may find it a long road to the frontier," I said.

Her hand was still in mine as we plunged deeper and deeper into the shelter of the forest.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DIM HOLLOW

WE went by narrow paths, forcing our way through the undergrowth, seeking the depths of the forest. The world was so full of silence that I feared lest the breaking of a twig might betray us. Open glades we did not enter, nor even dare to cross; and at the first glimpse of a clearing we turned aside to avoid it. From the tower yesterday I had seen horsemen go to right and left; sentries must have been posted to ring Syere in as completely as possible, and every road would be guarded, especially those leading towards the frontier. No doubt, keen-eyed horsemen were even now patrolling the forest, and presently men from the castle would be beating every thicket to find us. It would be madness to attempt to escape in the daylight. Was it possible to hide ourselves until nightfall? Sunlight was already in the tops of the trees above us, and like animals whose wandering is in the night, we must hasten to cover before the morning hunters were upon our tracks.

So I planned what we must do for the best, and except for a whispered word at long intervals, my lady and I did not speak. Along what course her thoughts were

running, I could not tell. She took the path I chose without comment, making no suggestion. Had I been a woodman, familiar with these forest ways from boyhood, she could not have placed greater confidence in my guidance. Until now, it had been too dark for me to note the expression in her face; I was only conscious of her quick, courageous step beside me as we traversed rough ways and forced a road through tangles of brake and briar; but as the light grew stronger, I was able to see her clearly. Very dainty she was in her page's dress. The cloak, hanging loosely from her shoulders, fell apart at intervals as she walked, revealing limbs that were lithe and straight, strong and supple, a figure as perfect, surely, as God had ever given to woman; yet it was the expression in her face which struck me most, even startled me, indeed. No haunting fear was there, no backward glance for the danger that might lurk in the shadows, no tense listening for the enemy who might come suddenly upon us. Instead, she walked like one who was free to choose her path, one to whom the whole wide world was open, whose progress none might hinder or question. Her head was erect as though she scorned to conceal herself, her step was elastic; I should hardly have been surprised had she laughed suddenly for very joy of this adventure. Perhaps it was the fear that she might do so which made me speak.

"The day is dangerous for us, mademoiselle. We must find some hiding place where we can wait until the night comes. Something is in our favour. They are

watching for a woman, and no woman is here. You were very wise to come as a page."

I think she had forgotten what dress it was she wore, for she glanced down at herself and then contrived to draw the cloak more closely round her. For an instant her eyes met mine. They were full of mystery, the mystery of a woman's soul which a man may never read completely. That look put new courage into me. The possibility of failure in our enterprise was forgotten, and I felt that the naked sword in my hand was powerful enough to shield her against all her enemies.

At some distance to our right was a green glade, sunlight in it; to our left there was dense undergrowth upon ground which dipped away from us. No path cut into this undergrowth, but I forced a way into the very midst of it, struggling with brake and briar and that twisted tangle of vegetation in which wild nature so delights. We must get away from that open glade. Downwards we went until presently the descent of a steep bank brought us into a circular hollow.

"Could there possibly be a better hiding place than this?" said my lady in a whisper as she stood and looked around her.

Indeed, we seemed secure from all the world. From the midst of the undergrowth, which came to the very edge of the hollow and screened it on all sides, trees rose, lacing their branches to overarch it; while half way down the steep bank sturdy saplings were set at irregular intervals, sentinels watching this quiet retreat — so my lady's fancy called them. Fair weather and foul pene-

trated here with difficulty. The light was dim, dim as the aisle of some old cathedral; silence seemed here to have found a place where it could reign supreme, and the dry leaves of many winters carpeted it with soft luxuriance.

I heaped the leaves together to form a couch for my lady, and when she had sat down, cast myself at her feet. It was good to rest awhile. The silence of the forest was about us, and for a long while we did not speak. In this dim hollow we seemed more utterly alone together than we had ever been. My lady's face was turned from me, but her attitude told of a reverie which I dared not break. In the moonlight on the tower that night — how long ago it seemed! — she must have understood that I was her lover, and there had been no shrinking from me, no look of anger had come into her eyes; was not this an hour when a lover might speak, tell plainly all that was in his heart, and since peril was near, whisper comfort and courage as only a lover can? Words were burning on my tongue, yet I could not speak them. Never did man feel more unworthy than I as I lay at my lady's feet; never was lover more sure that the woman he worshipped was as a star in the heavens, far above him and utterly beyond his reach. Yet, the unworthy may plead, a man may strive for the impossible. I kept silent. A sense of honour kept me so. Now, this woman was utterly dependent upon me; she was in my keeping, a sacred trust; no word of mine must hurt her. I would take no advantage of my position, I would make no attempt to play upon her gratitude.

When I whispered of love she must be free from danger, untrammelled by circumstances, free to say me nay if she would, and go her way. So I watched her, and surely, had she looked into my eyes she must have understood all I dared not speak.

"The Irishman, O'Connell?" she asked, suddenly turning to me and breaking the thread of my musing.

"Dead," I answered.

There was a pause.

"I knew it must be so or you would not have left him," she said quietly, a catch in her voice.

"His death gave us the few precious moments so necessary to us. We owe him much, mademoiselle. God rest his soul."

Her head was bowed, and again there was silence.

"The child will be safe," she said.

"Yes, please God. I would she had come with us. I would have forced her to it had she not run back."

"She will be safe," she said again. "Who would suspect that she had any power to help us? I bring strange trouble on my friends. Will it always be so, I wonder?"

It was evident that the little kitchen maid troubled her. She was not so certain of her safety as she tried to be.

"Mademoiselle, there is sometimes so great a joy in service that the end matters nothing," I said, in an attempt to comfort her. "Tell me of O'Connell, and how you came to know of what had happened at the banquet last night."

"He brought me your message, and would have me go at once whilst the banquet was in progress," she said. "So you had ordered, he declared. You would join us presently, he swore to that belief, perjuring himself. I knew what your order meant, Captain Heselton. You thought of my escape, not of your own."

"There were many chances for me, for you only one."

"O'Connell was relieved when I refused to go so hurriedly," she went on, "and was quick to fall in with my plans. Captain Heselton, when I read the Count's letter to the Princess, I suspected treachery. His sudden coming confirmed my belief. I was sure he was working out some subtle scheme for your undoing and mine. What he intended, I could not know, but, if necessity arose, I urged O'Connell to seem as hot against you as your worst enemy, and well he played the part. He and the seneschal and a dull-witted German were foremost to seize you. He would have contrived to be your gaoler had you been taken to the dungeons, or failing that, would have silenced any other. A chance, a happy chance gave you another prison."

Here was the explanation of Max's savagery. It was revenge because the Irishman had deceived him.

"O'Connell came to me and told me what had happened, and where you were a prisoner. Now I could act, and I made plans with O'Connell. Then, with the help of the child —"

"You saved my life," I said.

"To be my guide, to help me," she returned quickly.

It almost seemed that she dreaded what I might say more.

"How came you to know of the way of escape?" I asked, after a moment's pause.

"Strangely," she answered. "You know I have been long at Syere."

"Yes, with the Princess."

"You can imagine how we talked together of escape some day. We could roam the castle at will, although the seneschal was ever watchful, and from many a point on the battlements, from many a narrow window, we have looked down on the world, wondering whether any road of escape lay that way. Did I not tell you that the Princess's fancy saw steps leading down the rugged wall of that lonely tower to safety? Then one day I found an old book, cast into a corner as rubbish. Its binding was broken, several of its pages were missing, but it proved to be an old history of Syere. It was written in a curious mixture of Latin and old French, but I contrived to understand much of it. I was educated in Paris, and for a woman, not so ill-educated; my learning served me with this tattered volume. From it I learnt many of Syere's secrets, of a way from the apartments used by the Princess to that small door on the narrow stairs; of the passage behind the well, and of many hiding places which had been long forgotten. I wandered about the castle, sometimes at night, testing the truth of what I read. I found many secret ways in Syere, but not one out of it. It may be that the

missing leaves told of the door by which we escaped."

"Surely the Princess could not know all this or —"

"She did not know. I did not tell her everything."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps because every woman loves a secret; perhaps because she grew rather impatient of my studies. It has proved fortunate that I did not tell her."

"Then you know —"

"That she came to you last night? Yes."

She did not turn to me as she spoke, and I felt that I must not question her further. How could I, without telling her of my love? Did she know what the Princess had said? what I had answered? Was that trap in the wall open then? Were there listening ears behind the tapestry?

"So we are here, Captain Heselton," she said after a pause, "and to-night —"

"To-night we travel towards the frontier," I answered. "I have thought how we must go. We will travel by the road that leads back to Dravstadt. That is the one way they will think we shall not attempt. They will not watch that road as keenly as they will the others. When we reach the rising ground we will turn aside, and by a wide circle round Syere make for the frontier. We are a man and a youth, they are looking for a man and a woman; that is in our favour. Somewhere we may contrive to find horses, borrow them, without asking leave, perhaps; and another dawn should find us free."

"Free. It seems strange that I should be free."

"Mademoiselle, something of the joy of service, of sacrifice for another, has been yours. Had you chosen to leave the Princess you could have been free."

"Yes."

"You could most easily have left her when you came to Dravstadt."

"Why, yes, that is true."

"I am glad you did not or I had never seen you."

A word or a look even, and in spite of my resolution I should have been telling her everything. She neither spoke nor looked at me. She did not move, yet I had a curious sensation that she was further away from me for a moment. Some consciousness of her position may have come to her. For a moment I think she was a little afraid of me.

"Mademoiselle, I have much to ask your pardon for," I said quickly. "I was once very rough in conversation with a page."

"I think the page deserved no better treatment," she answered. "I talked so that you might not recognise me. Was it wonderful that I did not wholly trust you then?"

"No."

"The youth the Count had sent to attend the Princess was well known to me. It was not difficult to persuade him to let me go in his stead, and he quietly left Dravstadt that afternoon. I could not be separated from the Princess, and it was necessary for me to get away

from Christian of Varna. The dark night, and the excitement in the courtyard, helped me."

"I never suspected the truth," I answered.

"And it was not so wonderful that the page should know so much concerning women, was it?"

"What I resented, mademoiselle, was the manner in which he spoke of a lady in gray."

"It was foolish, Captain Heselton," she said quickly. "Pray forget all I said that night. I have told you why I talked so."

Again I was tempted. The whispers in which we spoke gave our conversation such a sense of intimacy that it was difficult to keep my secret.

"I will remember nothing but what you bid me remember," I answered. "I think it was fate brought me to Dravstadt so that I might be at hand to serve you, and if we reach the frontier safely, I have no quarrel with fate."

"How came you to Dravstadt, Captain Heselton?"

"As a piece of wreckage comes to shore," I answered. "The story is too long to tell now. Mademoiselle, there will be no rest for us to-night, and last night you can have had none; could you not sleep a little, while there is opportunity?"

"I am not tired."

"Still, try to sleep."

"And you?"

"I am used to long vigils. You may trust me to keep good watch."

"Trust you! Did ever woman trust man more?"

I think she meant to thank me chiefly because I had not spoken of love. I heaped more leaves together that her couch might be comfortable. It was only her spirit which had denied fatigue. In a few moments she slept.

It is a good thing when a woman trusts a man, he feels more like the creature God meant him to be. Yet, with the knowledge that I was so trusted came a keener sense of my unworthiness. Oh, I am no sentimentalist, nor would I make myself worse than I was, that were foolish and unnecessary. Something of good had clung to me; I had not coarsened as had many of my comrades, but in a measure, at least, I had lived as my fellows. What else was to be expected? Until my lady had walked into the barrack yard that afternoon, what reason had I to live otherwise, or to reverence women? Our environment was against us. Those who would know Gentlemen of the Guard in Dravstadt were of small importance. Were a woman pretty enough to quarrel about, her kiss was for the man who fought for her successfully. Since I had known my lady, my soul had been astir with better things, and as I sat watching her as she slept, a smile upon her lips, I would have given much to have had no part in some of the doings in Dravstadt.

She slept long. It was a wise thought of mine to make her rest. When she woke, the afternoon was well advanced. She sat up suddenly, startled to find herself there.

"I was dreaming," she said.

"Pleasantly, I trust."

"Yes. I awoke a little too soon to know the end."

"Life is like that, too," I answered.

"Cannot you sleep a little, while I watch?" she asked.

"No."

"You do not trust me?"

"Mademoiselle, I will sleep when you are in safety, but not until then."

"It is darker, surely. I have slept a long time."

"It is afternoon, but our waiting is not over. I was to die at noon to-day. The Count gave me a choice last night, and my choice led me to death."

"Death has been cheated," she said.

"Thanks to you, mademoiselle. Last night, I do assure you, I thought I had come to the end of my adventures."

"And to-night—" she paused. "Who can tell what the night may hold for us?"

"Good, mademoiselle; never doubt it. This is the second time you have saved my life."

"The second time?"

"On that night at the palace when you escaped from the crush with the Princess, do you remember that I could scarce keep the door open for you to pass? One of your shoes was wrenched from your foot."

"Yes, I remember."

"A little gray shoe, mademoiselle. It looked so fragile, such a dainty thing to lie there and be trodden under hurrying feet, that I picked it up and thrust it in my tunic."

"Why?"

I did not answer for a moment.

"It belonged to you, so surely I may say you saved my life. In the fight that night, one thrust it turned aside; another, the heel stopped altogether. You see, mademoiselle, the stain is here, and look at this hole in the heel. I warrant the maker of this never guessed what a purpose it was to serve."

I had the shoe in my hand, and she had bent forward to look at it when I started to my feet. In a moment I had thrust the shoe away, and my sword was gripped in my hand. Someone was pushing his way through the undergrowth, even as we had done; one, or it might be two men, the sounds did not tell me exactly. I could hear the slow pushing forwards, the sharp snapping of the twigs as a path was made. No chance visitor this, but someone who knew of this hollow.

"Stand by this tree," I said in a whisper to my lady, giving her my hand to help her to one of the saplings growing half way up the steep bank. "You must still be brave."

"I have no fear."

"Cling to this tree and do not leave it, whatever happens."

"I do not promise that."

"You must."

"We are in God's hands, Captain Heselton; and He gives me the one man I would have near me in such an hour as this. Look!"

I was facing her for a moment, every fibre that was in

me trembling at her words. She was pointing across the hollow behind me, and I turned to look.

At the top of the bank opposite, the bushes had parted. Pale, dishevelled, only partially recovered from the blow I had given him that morning, was the seneschal, and behind him stood Christian of Varna.

CHAPTER XXVI

TWO LOVERS

THE sight of me seemed to put new life into the seneschal. A look of malignant triumph came into his face as he pointed at me and turned to his master. The Count laughed, that boyish laughter which always had something so attractive about it.

"I said we should meet once more, Heselton. It is not my fault that it was not at noon to-day."

I did not answer. I was listening for sounds in the wood behind him, wondering how many men he had within call, thinking how I might trick my enemies even at this eleventh hour. The Count guessed what was in my mind.

"We are alone, we four; you and I, each with his witness. There is no need to speak in whispers. We might shout a long while before we were heard. This is a secure retreat. But for the seneschal here, who chanced to know of it, and realised how likely a hiding place it was, you would not have been found. You are a fool, Heselton, or you would not have spared this fellow's life a second time. You knocked the senses out of him this morning, but some men have hard skulls. He

is one of them and has recovered in time to ruin your little plans."

So light and bantering was his tone, no one would have imagined that deadly business was on hand. I did not speak. I did not know whether these two were alone or not. I did not move from where I stood in front of my lady.

"And yet you are not all a fool," the Count went on, "for you have not been so thoroughly tricked as I. You saw the quarry plainly enough, recognised the quality of it, and pursued it without a thought of the consequences. Just like an Englishman, but how could you hope for a happy ending? A King and a Captain of Horse! You are too fond of playing against heavy odds. I can admire your courage and laugh at your impudence, but for you it is a serious business."

"Not quite so serious as it would have been had we met at noon," I answered.

"Truly, this is a more picturesque setting, and the presence of the lady to see the end adds piquancy to the situation. You were unwise not to listen to the Princess last night. I think you must have treated her in a somewhat unmannerly fashion. She came to me full of anger, and you can guess what she told me."

"I cannot."

"Everything," he answered; "and since she has done me such excellent service, she shall go free. She has my permission to leave Syere whenever she will. You have my word for that, Heselton."

"If that be true, you lift a burden from me," I said.

"Though you believe reluctantly, you answer cleverly. An excellent diplomatist lies hidden under the soldier in you. When first I laughed with you at the strange serving maid who had caught your fancy, I did not dream how subtle a man I had to do with."

I did not understand so long a parley. What was its object? Was he waiting for men to come and take me? I could hear no sound of them.

"And this same serving maid looks wondrously well as a page," he went on. "You cannot marvel that I am your rival."

"No, that does not astonish me."

"The lady is the riddle," laughed the Count. "It is a woman's whim, I take it, that sees more romance in a captain than in a king."

I did not answer him.

"It is so absurd that even now I am inclined to bargain with you. Give the lady into my keeping, and you shall go in safety. Such impudence as yours merits some recognition."

He paused, but I did not break the silence.

"Why, man, bring common sense to bear upon the argument. Will you not best serve the lady by allowing me to relieve guard?"

"The lady has chosen her guard."

"Ah, but it is a mere whim, a very frolic of sentiment. I appeal to the lady. She is wise enough to see what is possible and what is not. Bid your sentry depart, my lady. In serving you so well maybe he has unwittingly harmed you somewhat. That harm it shall

be my lifelong duty to repair. Thank him and let him go. If you will, he shall take some reward for his services; gold in his pocket for payment."

My lady did not answer him, nor did she move. I did not turn to her, my eyes were fixed upon the Count.

"So, common sense fails; it is a pity. Yet, I find consolation in the failure. You are not the only fool, Heselton; I am of the brotherhood. It were easy to surround this hollow with men, and a word would make an end of the affair; but a woman robs me of wisdom, and sets us face to face, one man against another, with only our courage and skill to help us. This thing also, we have talked of. I would prove myself the worthier of the two in the eyes of the woman."

"You play the man, but how about the seneschal?" I asked.

"Plague take it, Heselton, he would not have troubled us at all, had you been wise and run him through this morning. Your cloak."

The seneschal hesitated to give it and said something in a whisper.

"Your cloak," demanded the Count, "and stand where you are or I'll do Captain Heselton's work for him."

Partly with his sword, partly by tearing, the Count slit the cloak into bands which he knotted together, and with this improvised rope he bound the seneschal to one of the saplings which grew on the steep bank opposite. Then he gagged the man and bound a thick piece of the cloth over his mouth.

"Are you satisfied?" he said to me.

"It seems secure," I answered, uncertain whether there was not some trickery in it.

"It is. Here's the proof," and he pricked the seneschal with his sword. "I warrant that was enough to bring a squeal out of him, were he able to utter a sound."

No cry came, but the sudden squirm of the body convinced me that the prick had been none too slight. I rather pitied the seneschal.

"Still the odds are heavy against you, Heselton, but we'll set them at a balance. Tethered in a little clearing yonder are two horses, the seneschal's and mine. You may easily find them by following our track through the undergrowth. The seneschal's is for the lady, mine is yours, if you leave this hollow. With one of us the lady shall ride to-night. If with me, it will be towards Dravstadt, and the bells of the capital shall ring a joyful peal at her deliverance; if with you, I would counsel that you take the same road, for there are few watchmen that way. You may turn aside and go where you will once you are clear of Syere."

"Count —"

"Stay, man, there is not yet an equal balance," he said. "Some wandering guards might encounter you and bring trouble. Catch. It is my ring. Let the lady take it. That should give you safe conduct from end to end of Saxe-Oldenburg."

I passed the ring behind me to my lady. This was a generosity beyond all expectation. It made me feel mean by comparison,

"Is death the only solution of the difficulty?" I asked.

"What other can there be since you will not understand that I come to relieve guard?"

"Cannot your generosity go one step further and let the lady decide which of us shall ride with her to-night?"

"That is unworthy, Heselton," he laughed, "an attempt to pull the balance in your favour. The lady is prejudiced just now and cannot choose wisely. Do you dread the encounter?"

"I would it could be otherwise for the odds are now with me. You fight in an unworthy cause."

"I judge as I may and I take my chances."

"You face a desperate man, Count."

"A desperate lover, Heselton, let's have the whole truth of it; and such a lover, too, am I. What advantage I can take of you, I will, so defend yourself as best you may. Here we stand, my lady, two men who love you. Between us, the sword decides."

With the naked weapon in his hand he came to the centre of the hollow, and there I met him.

Could Count Christian have seen into my soul at that moment, I doubt not he would have laughed at me for a coward. Truly, there was something of fear in me. How could it be otherwise when so much depended on my skill? Of death I was not afraid, we had walked in company too long for that, but I feared greatly for my lady. I alone stood between her and disaster. Besides, I was conscious of a certain respect for this man with whom I stood face to face which made me wish that

the issue between us were not so desperate. He had deceived me, he had attempted to make a tool of me, doubtless he would have hanged me at noon had I not escaped out of his hands; yet, in this supreme moment he had shown himself a generous enemy, had proved that the spirit of chivalry was in him. As a King, he might work his will and treat me as a traitor in his path; as a man, he rejoiced to meet me on level terms.

Unless his face gave the lie to his thoughts — and I do not think it did — never did a man cross swords more lightly with an adversary than Christian of Varna did with me. By his smile, this might have been a friendly bout of play he was engaged in, rather than a life and death matter. He had absolute faith in his swordsmanship, and had no doubt concerning the issue of the encounter. I am convinced this was so because of the change which presently came in his attitude.

He did not leave me long in doubt as to what manner of swordsman I had to do with. His pose was easy, his body lissome, his wrist flexible, yet of iron. His play was quick and brilliant. More than once I could see that he thought my defence over late and believed he had my measure.

“Better confess, Heselton, that you play for too high a stake,” he said, convinced that at that moment I had barely escaped his point.

I did not answer. If he thought to make me careless by taunting me, he was mistaken. I was on the defensive, waiting, judging my enemy, taking no risks. I would learn what tricks of fence he had, what thrust he

relied upon to give him victory. The light was dim. This hollow was not an ideal place for such an encounter, and I think, by attacking so persistently, the advantage of the light was with him; still, he might tire more quickly. That I did no more than fight upon the defensive may have caused him to hold me lightly, and convinced him that he could bring the end when he chose. The thrust I was waiting for came, and was parried. He smiled — laughed almost. Possibly the defence looked awkward, seemed more a chance parry than one of deliberate skill. I think that was why the smile became almost a laugh, for the thrust came again quickly, just altered sufficiently to make it the more deadly.

There flashed through my brain the memory of a bare, whitewashed room in Paris, in an alley off the Boulevard St. Michel, and once more I saw before me an absinthe-soddened little Frenchman whose master in fence has yet to be born. Some small service I had rendered him, and in his half crazy gratitude, he swore he would teach me sword play which should astonish those fools across La Manche. He hated the English, I was the only exception to the rule. I cannot say that he succeeded in fulfilling his promise, my natural disability stood in the way, but he taught me much. Once, I remember, when we were practising this very stroke and its parry, I succeeded in twisting the weapon from his hand and sending it point uppermost to the ceiling, where it would have stuck but for the button on it, and he came near to tears in his delight in having such a pupil. On

that occasion there was more absinthe in him than usual, probably. His lessons saved me now. Had not the Count had a wrist of iron, his weapon would have been circling through the air; as it was, he sprang back sharply on the defensive, understanding the dangerous position in which his failure had placed him.

It was then that the smile faded from his face. He realised, for the first time, I believe, that the issue was not so certain as he had imagined. His whole attitude changed. He no longer pressed the attack as he had done. There was a subtle difference in the man, I felt it, was conscious of it in a curious way, and remembered that he had declared he would take what advantage of me he could. Up to this moment, I believe some regret would have touched his victory, since my death must be the price of it; now, the chivalry in him seemed to dry up and hatred and craftiness to take its place. He would have welcomed help, would have called for it had there been anyone to hear. There would be no generosity in his treatment were I again in his power. Could he have released the seneschal, or driven the waiting horses from the clearing, he would have done so. I do not say fear had gripped him, but the thought that there was even a chance of our escape maddened him. Deadly earnestness was in the eyes which looked into mine across the blades, and I watched them carefully, knowing that my adversary would take what advantage he could, sure that now he would be none too scrupulous.

Although no longer upon the defensive, I took no risks. The Count's feints did not tempt me. I did

not accept an obvious opening, which in exchange for a flesh wound would let him send his point through my heart. I was too old a campaigner for that, too level-headed to grow excited at the magnitude of the stake for which we fought, or to attempt to force the end unduly. Even the feel that his weapon was less tense, less rigid, did not deceive me; he might be tiring, but I only became the more wary.

The light was failing. Daylight ended early in the forest, very early in this hollow set in the depths of it. I was conscious of no sound but the ring of the steel. Not once, I think, could my lady have moved, there had been no rustling of the fallen leaves behind me; nor had sound or movement come from the seneschal tied to the tree opposite. We might have been two men alone in a silent world fighting for the mastery of it. The intense strain was telling on us both, and the growing darkness made it certain that the struggle must come quickly to an end.

The Count suddenly parried a thrust of mine awkwardly and at the same time cried out:

“Look! Mademoiselle!”

Sharply came an answer.

“No.”

It was my lady who spoke. But for her short, quick word, I should have turned. She understood; for an instant, I did not. The Count had deliberately attempted to throw me off my guard, using the only means which he believed would be effectual, and which undoubtedly would have served him but for my lady.

Even as she spoke, and fully expecting to have me at his mercy, the Count dealt his villainous stroke. A moment later he stood erect, then his arms were thrown out stiffly, mechanically like an automaton's, and a sigh whistled from his lips. He swayed back from me, his body twisted in a sudden convulsion, and he fell, setting the dried leaves spinning for an instant. Then there was silence in the dim hollow.

His treachery had proved his own death warrant. His blade had flashed by me, only slitting my tunic; mine had passed through his heart. Christian of Varna was dead.



He fell, setting the dried leaves spinning for an instant. *Page 312.*

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

GOD knows there was no exultation over my victory. A moment ago fierce anger — and righteous anger surely — had come as answer to treachery; but with my enemy stretched at my feet, it was easy to forgive, easy to regret that only in his death could there be any hope of safety for us.

I turned to my lady. She was clinging to the sappling, clinging to it for support. Horror was in her eyes, and I realised what a terrible sight this woman had been forced to look upon.

“It is time to go,” I said in a low tone. Instinctively I did not hold out my hand to her; a moment ago it had done such awful work. My sword was free, my enemy had fallen backwards from it, and I plunged it to the hilt into the dried leaves. I would let her see as little of this tragedy as possible.

She came slowly down the bank, trembling and very pale. I thought she would have fallen, but I would not touch her. She did not speak. For a moment she stood beside the dead man, not looking at him for her eyes were closed; I think she whispered a prayer for the repose of his soul, and there was an echo in my heart.

Then we crossed the hollow and stopped by the tree to which the seneschal was bound. Poor wretch! He could have little hope of life when he saw his master fall. From me he could expect no mercy, and he must have suffered the agonies of death as I approached, the naked sword still in my hand since I had no scabbard in which to sheath it. His eyes turned in a mute appeal to my lady, a look which at first had nothing but fear in it, and then changed into one of startled surprise, as though he had read her thought before she put it into words.

"No, no," she whispered. "Is more necessary?"

It was an appeal, yet, knowing our peril, she would not over urge me. She spoke quickly and turned away. Perhaps she was conscious of the naked sword, and forgetting I had no scabbard, expected me to use it again. I had no intention of killing the seneschal. I tried his bonds to make sure that he could not loosen them, and looked at the gag to see that it had not slipped, to be certain that he could not raise an alarm. But I could not let him go; he must take his chance of being found before starvation came.

I led the way through the undergrowth in the direction from which the Count had come, my lady following me closely.

"Do you believe what he said?" she asked in a low tone.

"We shall know directly."

"He was treacherous," she said.

"You have his ring."

"Will that help us?"

"We may not have to use it."

My answers were really arguments against my own fears. Now that we had left the dim hollow behind us, I realised how perilous our position still was. Had the count spoken the truth? Even if horses were waiting in a clearing hard by, our enemies were still looking for us; would the ring prove any protection? Indeed, might not our possession of it be an added danger and suggest that the Count had met with foul play? Little mercy would there be for us, if once this suspicion were in the minds of the men of Varna.

Truly, there is no wisdom in going forth to meet evils. To be ready and to wait is best, for some troubles will perish by the way, while others will have grown so weak upon the journey that they may be met with ease; yet, because of the woman beside me, I could not school myself to such wisdom just now. A fear that we should miss the clearing had taken hold of me when I parted a tangle across my path and stepped into it. The Count had not lied. The horses were there, good horses which evidently had not been ridden hard that day.

"That he spoke the truth makes me regret his death the more, mademoiselle," I whispered.

She motioned me to help her into her saddle. As a page she had mounted unaided in the courtyard at Dravstadt; I think she had noted my reluctance to touch her and chose this way to reassure me.

"There was something good in him, yet he was treacherous," she said.

That treachery she could not forgive. For a moment I wondered at the hard tone in her voice; then understanding came to me. It was my life he had tried to take by a trick — my life which was dear to her. With my foot in the stirrup I paused to look up into her face. Night was coming on apace. It was too dark to read what was in her eyes, but I think she guessed that understanding had come to me.

"Which way?" she asked.

There was only one natural way from the clearing, and we took it.

We went slowly and in silence, uncertain of our path. In fleeing from the castle that morning, we had wandered far, turning aside so often to avoid clearings and too obvious paths that from our dim hollow we could not tell in which direction Syere lay. When we presently came into a wide glade, the stars were out above us, still pale in a slowly darkening sky, and they were a guide to me. We took a path running southwards. No one crossed our way; no calling voices told of pursuit; no silent watchmen came out of the undergrowth to stop us. Once or twice we drew our horses to a standstill, startled by a sound which might mean the approach of an enemy, but it proved to be only the cry of some animal hunting or being hunted.

We struck the Dravstadt road at a point which could not be far from the castle.

"Keep to the turf," I whispered, and I gripped

the naked sword firmly. I was a dangerous man to-night.

Still we proceeded at walking pace, galloping horses might have been heard. If sentries were watching the road, we passed them unseeing and unseen. Slowly we mounted towards the high ground, travelling the road I had so often watched from the towers of Syere at dawn, the road which had seemed the highway to my desire when I thought of my lady. Now she was beside me, in my keeping. Was I riding towards that goal of which I had dreamed so constantly?

At the selfsame spot from which I had first seen the castle, we halted, and turned in our saddles to look back. A point or two of light from some window high up in the rock fortress marked where Syere stood. Within, there was revelry still perchance, for men will feast though their comrades hunt fugitives. Had they yet begun to wonder that Christian of Varna delayed his coming? Did any there question why his chair at the board remained so long unoccupied? Certainly they would wonder presently, and ask questions, but would they easily leave their wine to go in search of him? Excellent vintages were in the cellars of Syere, they had found that out last night; it would be dawn probably before they went to seek their master. The leaves in that dim hollow might remain undisturbed until then, perhaps for many hours longer.

"I think the greatest peril is over," I whispered.

"I pray I may never look upon Syere again," said my lady.

"We must use the hours of darkness to the best advantage, mademoiselle."

She touched her horse and we broke into a canter. For two miles or more we rode, hardly exchanging a word, and then we turned aside to cross a wide tract of open moorland. Presently, we could go North again, making a wide circle round the neighbourhood of Syere, and join the main road as near as possible to the frontier. At a little stream we stopped to drink and to give our horses water, and the few hard biscuits which my lady had slipped into the pocket of her cloak, and forgotten until now, were welcome food.

Now that the danger was less, my brain became busy with other thoughts, and the pivot about which they turned was this woman who rode beside me. The past was to me of no long duration, going back only to that hour when she had walked into the barrack yard, when her indignant cry had disturbed my perusal of a letter. Everything which had occurred before that seemed unreal and small concern of mine, but for all that had happened since then, my memory was vivid. I think I could have repeated every word my lady had said to me, could have recalled the tone of her voice when she said it, and the expression of her face. Under the circumstances, it was hardly wonderful that I should remember most clearly that night in the round room at Dravstadt. Then she had said that the man who helped her to place the Princess in safety might ask of her any favour he would; what answer would she give now? I had not carried the Princess into safety, yet in a few hours we

should cross the frontier, all being well. Was there more for me to do? something yet to be accomplished before she would listen to my pleading? Indeed, would she listen at all to the one favour I should ask?

We had been riding for a long time when she broke the silence.

"Is it still dangerous to talk, Captain Heselton?"

"No, mademoiselle."

"Yet you keep strangely silent."

"I was busy with thoughts."

"Will you not talk a little? There are phantoms about me that I would try to leave behind. We have lived through much in the last few hours, and I am a woman. To a man, to a soldier, peril and bloodshed come of necessity and may easily be forgotten; but to a woman — For all that I masquerade in these clothes, I am a woman, Captain Heselton, and I think the time of reaction is upon me."

"Forgive me, mademoiselle. You have been so splendidly courageous that I have hardly realised what these hours must have meant to you. I have thought so much about your safety that —"

"I know, I know," she said quickly, "and I have no words yet to thank you. I am not complaining, but now — Can you not talk to me about some of your thoughts?"

"When you spoke, I was thinking of the Princess, mademoiselle."

"I have thought much of her, too," she answered.

"The Count swore that she would go free, but he is dead and —"

"She will be safe," said my lady with conviction; "has perchance already started upon her journey from Syere. She made her bargain with the Count last night."

"What bargain? What secret had she to tell to put him in such good humour and make him send messengers hot-footed to Dravstadt?"

"Was she not of the same mind as the Count?" asked my lady. "Did she not come to you and —"

"Yes; still I do not understand."

"I think I do."

"Do you know why she came to me, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And you know all that passed between us?"

"It was the little maid who listened, not I, and she heard only a part, but I know enough to be very certain what it was the Princess said to Christian of Varna."

"Tell me."

"Not now," she answered. "I might speak a little bitterly since her bargain brought greater peril to me. I would not be unjust. Much may be forgiven a woman when she loves as — as the Princess loves. I will tell you presently, Captain Heselton, when — when we have crossed the frontier."

"And Father Anthony's attitude, do you understand that, too?"

"Yes."

"I think he is of those who would hold to the winning side and trouble little with his conscience," I said.

"Perhaps you do him some injustice. But you talk only of the phantoms that are troubling me, you do not help me to forget. Will you not talk of other things?"

"Of what, mademoiselle?"

"Of yourself."

"Would you fall asleep in your saddle that you suggest so weary a subject?"

"I mean something of yourself in the past, before you came to Saxe-Oldenburg. I do not think it would weary me."

In a moment I thought of the letter I had been reading when she came into the barrack yard that afternoon. She should know something of me, the worst of me; it would be easier to speak of the best in me when presently I asked for her favour.

I told her more than I intended, it seemed necessary to answer many of the questions she asked, they were put in such a way it was impossible to escape them. Almost before I was aware of it, I was telling her why I had left England, telling her how a woman had betrayed me. Truly, she showed no weariness over the recital.

"She was not a good woman. I wonder that you loved her."

"There was no love, mademoiselle, no more than friendship, and some folly on my part. She was unhappy and I pitied her, tried to bring some joy into her life in a perfectly harmless way. Her husband was a

weakling rather than a scoundrel. In the end, she used me to save herself. Had I spoken I should have ruined her, and wrecked the happiness of others; so I kept silent."

"And ruined yourself," she said.

"Yes."

"And your friends?"

"Mademoiselle, they proved not worth the keeping."

"So you came to Dravstadt."

"To a new life."

"And infinite peril."

"Yet with some honour in it. Have I not risen to be Captain of the Guard?"

"To-night makes even that honour a thing of the past. Were you a soldier in England?"

"No. I assure you, mademoiselle, I was of so small account in my own country that my departure left no vacant place."

"Then you do not regret having come to Dravstadt?"

"Regret it!"

"Truly, you have found much adventure," she said quickly, "and won the love of — of a Princess."

"I think it was too quick a passion to be called love," I answered.

"Love may come like that, and a man might well love so fair a woman."

"Doubtless there are many such men," I returned.

"And a Princess, too."

"I do assure you the honour left me cold, mademoiselle."

"Yet you pitied her, and pity —"

"Mademoiselle, there is no power that could make me marry the Princess Suzanne."

She was silent for a little while.

"A Princess and the Captain of the Guard," she said reflectively, as though she were arguing with some thought which had come suddenly into her mind.

"You see how absurd it is," I said. "Besides, a man, poor though he be in the world's estimation, may look even higher than a Princess, even to the most perfect woman God has made."

She did not answer, and I said no more. The time to say more had not come. She should be under no compulsion when I asked my favour; she should be free to leave me if she would. I think she was glad I said no more. She asked no further questions, and she gave no sign that she had understood the meaning of my words. With some women, I believe, even when they love, there is a shrinking from that moment when love is confessed.

"It grows colder," I said presently. "Is the cloak well wrapped about you?"

"Yes. It is the cold that comes before dawn."

"We are in no hurry for dawn's coming, mademoiselle. Dark hours are still good for us."

"I think I have left fear behind, Captain Heselton."

"And before us — Who can tell what may happen at the next bend in the road? They are your own words, mademoiselle."

"You have remembered them, then?"

"Is that wonderful, seeing how my road has turned

since that night, and how great have been the happenings upon it?"

Some time since we had turned northwards. For a while we had let our horses fall into walking pace. Haste might be necessary at the end of the journey. Our enemies might be watching near the frontier. Now we broke into a canter again and spoke little.

I think both of us were conscious of leaving fear behind, and that a sense of expectancy was ours, as though we were riding out of the past into the future, and were confident that only good could come with the new day. There was a different tone in the few words my lady spoke from time to time, a joyous note in it, and once she laughed a little for no apparent reason. Some happy thought must have engendered that ripple of sound. I had not heard her laugh for a long while.

Presently came the dawn. Over the rim of the world eastwards hung the morning star, glorious, pendant against a background of sky suddenly fashioned like velvet, deep purple in hue. Rayed was the star, and poised like a jewel; a miracle of beauty, a transcendent talisman held over the expectant earth. For a space, all nature seemed motionless and silent, awestruck, and then quivering light shot upwards, banding the velvet curtain with gold and fire, shot upwards to the zenith until the world was flooded with a very riot of colour, and Nature's myriad voices awoke to song and praise. Dawn! The ever recurrent miracle of the dawn, with its beauty and its mystery — God in it.

And I saw my lady's face, pale, but no longer with

any horror in it, only a wonderful calm, as though some vision which her eyes had seen had brought peace to her soul. Those phantoms of the night were surely left behind. Through this gate of the dawn, she seemed to pass from one life into another, from the bondage of evil and fearful days to a freedom of happy restfulness; from a past of sorrow into a future of joy. I could have sung for gladness of heart. Was I not her comrade? Even as I had shared in the past must I not have my part in the future?

"A new day," I whispered.

I hardly know why I spoke in so low a tone.

"Thank you, for bringing me to it," she answered.

Onward we rode until the highway lay empty and straight before us. No hurrying pursuit was behind us, no enemy barred the road.

The world was awake and had broken fast when we rode into the little border town; a page, and a soldier carrying a naked sword, sorry travellers, dust-covered from head to foot, set on beasts ready to drop with their long journey. No wonder there was excitement and a flood of questions, and a gathering crowd in the market place. My lady had to be helped from her saddle, and I could hardly stand. The shifting crowd, the questions, the excitement, all were as a dream, as that thin dream which comes just before deep slumber. Only one thing was real to me; we were safe. I had brought my lady over the frontier.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TO-MORROW

REAL slumber, and deep, was mine for many hours. I awoke refreshed, yet with a sense of something lacking. I awoke, indeed, to a new existence, to a new life which was destined to run in shadows for many a long day. Even in setting down this part of my history, I would hasten it. Perchance I was a fool, perhaps I acted as an honest gentleman was bound to do; according to their temperaments, men and women have both praised and blamed me, and the one has made as little impression on me as the other. I thought I saw the right road to take, and took it. Heaven knows it proved a dreary journey to a disheartened traveller.

When I enquired about my lady, I was told that she was in the Governor's house, and that I was to wait until she sent for me. All day I waited, a poor companion, I fear, to the good fellows who tried to make me comfortable. Towards evening a message came, but not to bid me to my lady's presence, only to tell me that to-morrow she was to travel to Vienna and that I was also required to go. I do not suppose she sent the message in these

words, but the manner of it chilled me. It seemed to put the woman I loved very far away from me.

I slept little that night thinking of to-morrow, and when it came only disappointment was in it. True, I saw my lady and spoke with her, but not for an instant were we alone together. I was presented to the lady who was to be her companion on the journey, and to an officer who was to go with us, and it seemed to me my lady was glad not to be alone with me. Somehow, she had changed; she was a little unnatural, there was a curious restraint about her, and no sign of that sweet intimacy which had been between us. She was no longer a page, and the dress which had been procured for her was not gray. I tried to think that the change in her was due to my imagination, influenced by her different appearance; or, perchance, she was as any woman might be who knew she was loved and would not yet be told, but I failed to convince myself. More than this was behind her manner.

It was not until we arrived in Vienna that an explanation was forced upon me by circumstances. My lady was driven to the palace, the Emperor's honoured guest; a lodging at the barracks was found for me, and although I was courteously treated, I felt I was there on sufferance. What else could I expect? I had forgotten the great gulf which lay between my lady and me. She was maid of honour to the Princess Suzanne, a lady of high birth and position, as was evident by the manner in which she was treated; I was of the Guard of Saxe-Oldenburg, Captain of a crowd of disreputables gath-

ered from every nation in Europe. Probably the character of the Guard was as well known in Vienna as it was in Dravstadt.

For two days I seemed to be entirely forgotten, and then I was sent for to the palace. My interview was with a high official. He told me the Emperor would have seen me himself had he not been indisposed. In answer to his questions, I gave him an account of the rebellion and of what had happened at the castle of Syere. He was interested and very courteous, said many pleasant things about my courage and the resourcefulness I had shown, but throughout the interview he treated me with a certain carefulness, weighing his words, as though he were afraid that I should attempt to take some advantage of him.

"Such an affair as this naturally leaves you at a loose end, Captain Heselton. Is it your intention to return to England?"

The question took me by surprise.

"I have not yet decided," I answered. "The lady with whom —"

"I had almost forgotten," he said with a smile. "I was instructed to tell you that she will send for you to — to thank you."

To thank me. I had never realised how poor a recompense thanks may be to a man who desires love. The words seemed to strike a deeper chill into my soul. Was this the awakening from a dream? Had I foolishly read into my lady's words a meaning she had never intended? Was I at this moment no more to her than a difficulty, a

man of whom she would be rid? one who had served her and must be rewarded in some manner before he was sent away? It must be so, I thought; that was why she had delayed sending for me. Doubtless she dreaded the interview a little, feeling that her attitude would be difficult to explain. I laughed bitterly at the thought, marvelling that I had not been prepared for such an end. One woman had deceived and ruined me, how could I have been so great a fool as to trust another?

Four days went by slowly, and then my summons came. In the palace I was taken to an anteroom where I waited for some time. My lady, if she occupied the rooms beyond, had many callers this afternoon, for whilst I waited, several men were shown out. One, an elderly man who looked English, glanced at me swiftly as he passed; the others took no notice of me.

Then a servant came to me, and through a vestibule I was shown into a room, and the door was closed behind me. It was sombre and empty, I thought, but as I moved forward, there was the soft rustle of a dress, and my lady came from the embrasure of a window. She crossed the room until she stood close to me.

"I have been long in sending for you, Captain Heselton."

"Very long, mademoiselle."

"I have had much to do, many people to see, many, many interviews to endure. I am very tired of it all."

"And now I come; there is yet another interview, another weary interview."

"A difficult one," she answered.

"Why difficult? I was told you would send for me to thank me. Is it so difficult to say a few words of thanks and — and let me go?"

"No. That should be easy," she answered, after a pause.

"I have been asked whether I intended to return to England," I went on; "my answer was that I had not yet decided. Perhaps I should have acted wisely to go before you sent for me."

"Have you been asked about anything else?"

"Yes, I have been closely questioned about the rebellion."

"That is natural. Have you been told anything?"

"No. What is there to tell? I think I realise the position in which I stand. Here in Vienna, it is not possible to ignore the truth. The Captain of the Guard is no fit companion for a maid of honour."

"Something of the sort I have been told," she returned.

"Mademoiselle, there is nothing in the world I will not do for you, so thank me, since you have sent for me for that purpose, and bid me go."

"Thank you? How?"

"A few words."

"I have no words."

"Then a clasp of the hand in silence, the parting of good comrades who have faced hardship and peril together — a page and a soldier if you will — and there's an end of it."

"Is there?"

She looked straight into my eyes, taking no notice of my extended hand. God knows, for all my brave show, my outstretched hand trembled.

"Is that the end of it?" she said.

I know not whether it was her question or whether her eyes betrayed the secret of her heart, but my soul was suddenly on fire and the hot blood was leaping riotously through my veins.

"I want no thanks, only love — only you. When you came into the barrack yard at Dravstadt, you came into my life, and never again can you go out of it. Though this hour bring parting, your image must ever remain with me, enshrined in the temple of my heart. That day, my life and my manhood were dedicated to you, they are yours for all time. Not for a single hour have you been absent from my thoughts since then. I know how poor a thing I am, but since you came to me, the good that is in me has burst into flame again. I think there is nothing I may not attain to if you will give me love. Oh, my dear, tell me, whisper it, or let me look deep into your eyes for a moment and I shall read the truth there."

Her hands were in mine, but she did not look at me.

"Since I have come to Vienna I have heard of nothing but duty," she said in a low tone. "It has been the subject of nearly every interview; it has been urged on me by everyone from the Emperor downwards. It seems there is only one direction in which I may go."

"Duty! What duty? To the Princess? Is she in

peril? Is it your duty to help her? Let me share your burden."

"You cannot."

"I can ride back to Syere at your bidding."

"She is not in peril. When she left you that night, she made her peace with the Count, and he told us no more than the truth. I have news that she has already gone to Paris."

"Then —"

"You cannot understand. You cannot help me," she said.

"Do I stand between you and duty?"

"You, and my own heart. No, no, do not make it harder for me," she said quickly as my hands tightened upon hers and I would have drawn her close to me. "Let me go. Let me stand away from you. While you touch me, I am not mistress of myself."

I let go her hands and she stepped back from me.

"When we talked together in Dravstadt," she went on hurriedly and almost in a whisper; "when we stood on the tower at Syere that night; when we rode together towards the frontier; I forgot many things. Here, I have been forced to remember them."

"I know. To remember what you are and what I am," I said.

"Many things," she answered. "I thought I had fought my battle and won. To-day I meant to — to —"

"To send me away?"

"Yes. But now I am not strong enough to do it, to

make my choice. Duty has grown less in this hour. It is duty against, yes, against love — why should you not know it? — and you must help me. To-morrow — I will choose to-morrow. I will tell you everything then, and you must help me.”

“Tell me now.”

“No, I dare not. I am not calm enough, not sufficiently mistress of myself. I might say too much, or too little. I must have the night in which to think. Now, I only know that I am a woman who is loved by the — the man she loves. How can such a woman judge dispassionately?”

She threw out her arms in a gesture of despair.

“My dear, my dear, what can I say?”

“Nothing, now. To-morrow. Come early, so that daylight shall be ours when we face difficulty once more together. You shall listen to all I must say, and you shall tell me what I must do.”

I think I might have taken her in my arms and found little resistance; I think I might have pressed her lips with mine, but I would not take advantage of her confession. I fell upon my knee and raised her hand to my lips.

“To-morrow,” I murmured.

Wild joy and utter perplexity, both were mine. Love was mine, the love of the most beautiful woman God had fashioned, and for a little while this thought was all absorbing. But what was this duty which menaced her happiness and mine? It might reasonably have been urged to her that I was not worthy of her favour, and

however true it might be, love would surely conquer in such a battle. There was something else, something more forceful, which I was to be told to-morrow. The strength of this unknown barrier seemed to grow with every moment I thought of it. Had not my lady already decided in favour of this duty? Only at the last moment, and because I was with her, had she delayed the final choice. I knew her well enough to be sure that her decision had not been made lightly. What was this all important duty?

I was not destined to remain long in ignorance. Early in the evening I had a visitor, Lord Winterford, the English Ambassador. I recognised him as the elderly man who had looked at me so keenly as he had passed through the anteroom that afternoon.

"I have just come from the palace, Captain Heselton," he said abruptly as the door closed.

"My lady —"

"I have been with her. She does not know I have come to you. I have thought it right to take upon myself a disagreeable task. You will pardon me, and you will remember the position I hold in Vienna."

"I am sure you are doing what you believe to be right, Lord Winterford."

He looked at me quickly, much as he had done that afternoon.

"Strange, how familiar your face is to me," he said.

"I am sure we have never met," I said with a smile.
"I have had strange companions for some time past."

"The King's Guard. Yes, we have heard tales of the Dravstadt Guard, exaggerated, no doubt."

"Probably not," I answered.

"Well, Captain Heselton, I am not here to talk of your life in Dravstadt, or elsewhere, except so far as it concerns politics. I have heard your story, but only second hand; do you mind telling it to me yourself? If you feel that you can do so without any reservations whatever, you will make my task less difficult."

It was easy to comply because it meant speaking about my lady. I told him the whole story of my sojourn in Dravstadt, simply and without any reservation.

"It is a tale of courage and endurance of which any man might be proud, Captain Heselton," he said, when I had finished. "The political position you appear to understand. There is no doubt that Christian of Varna had a certain measure of European support, enough to establish him safely on the throne of Saxe-Oldenburg. His marriage to Princess Suzanne would certainly have healed many wounds, and the death of King Philip was a source of relief in more than one Court, I can assure you. He was always a firebrand, and more than once has nearly set war blazing in Europe. Now, the whole position is changed, and the situation has become acute. The throne is vacant. When Christian of Varna died in that dim hollow in the forest, by your hand, you made an international crisis."

"The Princess —"

"Has left the country," he said quickly.

"On her way to Paris. My lady told me so to-day. She must return."

He was silent for a moment.

"You would so advise her — if you had the opportunity, I mean?" he said slowly.

"Certainly. What else can she do? It is her obvious duty."

"She is inclined not to return," he answered. "If she persists in ignoring her duty, I do not exaggerate when I say that the position will be exceedingly grave, Captain Heselton."

"I do not understand, Lord Winterford, how this affects me, nor why you speak of a disagreeable task. What can I do in such a matter?"

"I am coming to that," he said, slowly and impressively. "You are an Englishman; England would almost certainly be involved in the difficulties, and it is an Englishman's duty to make sacrifices for his country. Now, you know some of the schemes of the Princess; you know the treatment she has received from her uncle and her dislike to the marriage he proposed for her. Her woman's wit would urge her to many subterfuges in order to cope with her crafty uncle, nor is she to be blamed. As a woman, she was open to be attracted in another direction, towards the man who was ready and was resourceful enough to aid her."

"A passing fancy, Lord Winterford."

"I wish I could think so."

"I am convinced of it," I answered, with a laugh;

"besides, my life is entirely devoted to another woman — her maid of honour."

"You were with her this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"She, too, spoke to you of duty — her duty. So much she told me, and I believe she will do as you urge her. You are to see her to-morrow?"

"Yes. She is to tell me then what this duty is which calls her so loudly."

"For her it is a choice between duty and love," he said.

"What is this duty?" I asked.

"Captain Heselton, the lady you love is not the maid of honour, but Princess Suzanne."

With a cry, I started to my feet.

"You mean — What do you mean?"

"For the better opportunity of carrying out her schemes, the Princess, when she came to Dravstadt to meet Christian of Varna, changed places with her maid of honour. To what extent the masquerade has helped her, I cannot judge, but I realise that it is very hard on you."

"Hard!"

"It is my duty to leave nothing unsaid," he went on. "I believe she will be guided entirely by you to-morrow. Are you strong enough to urge her to her duty, her obvious duty? They are your own words."

"God knows."

"I think she will want you to make her believe that

love calls more strongly than duty. Were I in your position, and asked how I should act, I, too, should say, God knows."

I looked up, struck by a new note in his voice.

"There is another way," he said.

Still I looked at him.

"There is the night mail to Paris. You could catch it and — and return to England."

I did not answer. My brain refused to act; no words came to my tongue.

"Captain Heselton, I came to-night in my official capacity. I admit, that knowing something of the King's Guard in Dravstadt, I thought I understood the kind of man I should have to deal with, one whose self-interest would be likely to be his sole guide. I was not sure, in spite of the Princess's opinion to the contrary, that you were not perfectly aware who it was who had ridden with you across the frontier. Now, I know I was wrong. Forget the ambassador, think of me only as a friend, a friend of your father's generation, one who feels for you most deeply. The night mail, that is my advice. It is the only thing an honourable gentleman can do under the circumstances; and you have my word that the Princess shall know the sacrifice you have made. I shall call early in the morning; I shall hope not to find you, but equally I hope that some day we may meet in England. You may always count upon me as a friend."

For an instant his hand pressed my shoulder, then I heard the door open and close again. I was alone. Oh,

the agony of that hour! I cannot speak of it. No words could tell what I passed through.

Princess Suzanne! Why had she never told me? Yet, how could she know that I should come to love her so. This was what she intended to tell me to-morrow. Now that I knew the truth, many things I had not understood were made clear. It had been easy for her to pose as the maid of honour. Hardly a person in Dravstadt knew the Lady of Syere. As a maid of honour, she was free to carry out her plans, more powerful to outwit her uncle. She had pleaded fatigue on arriving in Dravstadt, I remember hearing that, and then had not attended the banquet, which had angered the King. He, no doubt, was too anxious for the consummation of his scheme to treat her as he would have liked to have done, and so it came to pass that neither the King nor the Count saw her until the night of the ball, when she was masked. I had taken no interest in the rumour at the time, now I understood. This was the reason, too, why the Princess and the page had both hurried by the seneschal when we returned to Syere. Father Anthony knew the truth, but for his own ends, and doubtless that he might have some hold over the Count, had kept the secret. I understood now why the Count's proposal to marry me to the sham Princess had so pleased him, and why he had stood sentry with O'Connell lest the real Princess should escape. Now I knew what Christian of Varna was told that night of the banquet, why he had sent messengers so suddenly to Dravstadt with the news, why in the dim hollow he had accused me of cleverness.

The maid of honour he had pursued was the Princess — desire and policy pulled in the same direction, no wonder he was in such an excellent humour. And he believed that I knew the truth. A Princess, that was the high stake he taunted me with playing for. No wonder he had urged me to common sense. No doubt, at the moment of our leaving the hollow, the seneschal had recognised who the page really was, hence the strange look in his face. And something of the real maid of honour's action was explained, too. In her own fashion, I suppose, she loved me. It was natural that she should hope that that love would be returned. She knew how absurd it was that the Princess should marry the Captain of the Guard.

Absurd. Impossible. The words were hammered into my brain to-night. How long I sat there I do not know, but presently I was out in the night, by the palace, looking up at the dark windows, wondering where my lady slept, wondering what were her dreams to-night.

To-morrow!

When to-morrow came I was being carried swiftly towards Paris.

CHAPTER XXIX

AFTERWARDS

SPRING had been long in coming ; now each morning showed new beauties. Nature gave compensation for her delay, and her generous hands were busy in copse and hedgerow, in the gardens and over the wide stretches of park and meadow lands. Very beautiful was the world, my little world. From my open windows I looked across a broad terrace, over wide lawns, far over spreading park and woodland, a view which many generations of men and women had looked upon and loved. It was a part of themselves, of their very existence.

The room was a library, with many recesses in it and inviting corners. Soft and deep chairs were in it, much luxury in carpet and thick rugs, an atmosphere of peace. Books were from floor to ceiling, rare books many of them, a collection which many men had helped to bring together. It was not difficult when twilight came for imagination to fill a deep chair in a far corner with some grave-faced student, his dress of a by-gone fashion, poring over some choicely bound volume upon his knees. This room, indeed the whole house, was full of the memories of those who had spent their lives in it, known

love and sorrow in it, father and son, gray-haired dame and newly-made wife. This was the library of Lowminster Priory in Devonshire, for many generations past the seat of the Earls of Haversham.

Changes and chances bring strange things to pass, turning that which seems impossible into a reality. The knowledge that a vigorous turn had been given to the wheel of Fate had come to me in Dravstadt. No wonder the old family solicitor had written "You should certainly return at once." Circumstances had driven me to take his advice more promptly than I had intended. He welcomed me as the new Earl of Haversham. When I had left England in disgrace, a man who was well rid of, nothing seemed more unlikely than that I should come into the title. Busy death had taken lives, old and young, the old naturally, the young by the wreck of a pleasure yacht and a fall in the hunting field. It was strange that I, who had faced peril so often, who had so constantly rubbed shoulders with death, should remain.

Something more time and death had done for me. The woman for whose sake I had kept silent was dead, and had confessed. My character was cleared, and I suppose I might easily have posed as something of a hero. The world of Society threw its doors wide open to me, but I did not pass through them. No, a revengeful spirit was not in me, there was no idea of paying back the hard treatment I had received. Once I might have gloried in doing so, but that time was past. A few friendships I renewed; I need speak of only one here. The Duchess of Medworth had been a friend of my

mother's, and I think she was the only person who from the first had believed in me. I remember what she said to me just before I left England as if the words had been spoken only yesterday.

"You are a fool. You are hiding something. You purposely will not speak. No woman is worth the sacrifice you are making."

Perhaps she was right.

Now she called me a fool once more. I told her all my story just as I would have told it to my mother.

"You should have explained everything," she said decidedly. "The Earl of Haversham is no bad match for a foreign Princess."

"Lord Winterford —"

"I haven't patience with him," she interrupted, "and I shall tell him so when next I meet him. He knew your father, no wonder your face seemed familiar to him. I never did think he was fit to be an ambassador."

This opinion was prompted solely by her interest in me. The country knows that Lord Winterford was among the best of England's representatives.

"Besides, you did not tell him who you really were," the Duchess went on; "had you done so, his advice would probably have been different."

"I acted as I thought right."

"Praiseworthy, but what you think right is so often wrong. Are you going to let this Princess ruin your life? How long will it take you to forget her?"

"I shall never forget her."

"But you must marry."

“ I shall never marry.”

I think Her Grace of Medworth would have attempted to drag me by force into Society's whirl, and thrown into my way every eligible woman of her acquaintance, had I remained in London ; so I retired into Devonshire.

Eagerly in the papers, and through what private information I could obtain, I followed the fortunes of Princess Suzanne, and the short but stormy period through which Saxe-Oldenburg passed at this time. Lord Winterford had not exaggerated. For months the position remained most critical. The Princess, supported by Austria, returned to Dravstadt, and from the moment of her entry into the city, the whole country was in a state of rebellion. Her personality and her charm counted for nothing. She was of the House of King Philip, and the people were determined that no member of his House should occupy the throne. Perhaps, too, Austria's show of force in her favour did her harm and inflamed the people more. The whole country was set seething, and the Princess had to be carefully protected. From private sources I gathered that Father Anthony was very active, plotting with all manner of people, apparently in the interests of the Princess, but this was not quite certain. Knowing the man, I would rather have had him for an enemy than a friend.

Austria's action brought protests from the other powers who were not at all disposed to allow her to establish any kind of sovereignty over Saxe-Oldenburg. The longer the throne remained vacant, the more likely

she was to effect this, and statesmen were soon engaged upon another solution to the problem and suggested a partition of Saxe-Oldenburg, which, as everyone knows, eventually happened. All through the winter, rebellion was rife and diplomacy was busy. Of the former, I gleaned considerable information from the papers; of the latter, I could hear little. Statements were contradictory. That the Princess had returned to Vienna suggested that Austria meant to maintain the position she had taken up, but an inspired telegram from Berlin intimated that diplomatic relations were easier, and that a settlement had practically been arrived at. Court news from Vienna mentioned the Princess at intervals. She had been present at this function or that, or she was staying with some Arch-duchess in the country. More than once there was a hint of her marriage. She was evidently a considerable difficulty in European politics.

Twice during the winter, the Duchess of Medworth had visited me at the Priory, loud in her lamentations that such a home should be without a mistress, and a little critical about my housekeeper. To-day she was coming again. She had written to say she wanted to see Lowminster in the spring. I was very glad she was coming. She was one of those delightful persons who always do one good, whose hearts are young, though their hair has turned to silver. We should talk about the Princess, we always did, and I had a longing to talk about her just now. The spring, with its wonderful beauty and its awakening to new life, had only sadness

for me. I seemed to stand still while everything about me leapt forward to definite achievement; mine was the dumb voice in a chorus of song. For days past, I had been more than usually depressed, and this morning I was restless. My writing table was piled with papers requiring attention, all that business of a large estate which must have my personal supervision, but I could not settle to work. I could not sit quietly in a corner and read. The spring was in my blood; I wanted to be up and doing — but what? I had ridden before breakfast, a mad gallop in the open, but the world about me had not been Devonshire, but the bleak moorland round Syere, and I tried to think that another horse went stride for stride with mine, and almost listened for my lady's voice. Now I tried to write, now to read; all to no purpose. I crossed the room to a cabinet, and unlocking a drawer, took from it a little gray shoe. In a moment my lady seemed to stand before me in all her beauty. For an instant she was as she had stood in the round room at Dravstadt with the mask in her hand; then we were once more on the tower together under the full moon; now as a dainty page she was my comrade. The tears were in my eyes as I locked the shoe away again.

The house was too narrow for me this morning, I must be out in the open and have large spaces about me. The Duchess would not arrive until late in the afternoon. I had empty hours before me.

I walked across the park, out into the country beyond, straight before me, thinking nothing of time or the dis-

tance I covered. It was close upon four o'clock when I returned, and the Duchess met me in the hall.

"My dear Frank, don't apologise. You are an eccentric person, so it would not have surprised me if you had altogether forgotten that I was coming."

"But —"

"Oh, yes, it pleased me to come by an earlier train," she laughed, "that is a detail."

"The motor was not at the station."

"Of course not. I drove up in a most disreputable cab."

"You could have wired."

"I could, but I thought it might amuse you to see me in that cab, and after all you missed the excitement. You will have a little more of me than you expected to-day. May I tell them to bring tea into the library?"

"Do."

"Go and pick out two of the cosiest chairs; I will follow you. I am going to send a message to your housekeeper and ask her for some special hot cakes I am particularly fond of. Do you mind?"

"Give any orders you like," and I laughed as I went to the library. The Duchess had done me good already.

There was a fire in the library, for the evenings were still chilly. The light of it was dancing in the room. I entered quickly, then stood still upon the threshold, then closed the door gently. I thought I was dreaming. Someone had risen quickly from a low chair. The fire-light fell upon a woman in gray.

"The Duchess brought me," she said.

"My lady!"

It was all I could say. My soul was burning with a mysterious joy, yet I could give it no expression.

"Why did you go away?" she asked.

"I dared not stay."

"To-morrow came, and —"

"I could not have been sent away. The only thing was to go without seeing you. Was I not right?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I only know you left a very unhappy woman in Vienna."

"And now — now you are here," I whispered; "here in my home."

"The Duchess came to me in Austria, and told me about you. She urged me to come to England. I tried so hard to do my duty. Often I have been in great peril, and afraid. You were no longer near to help me and give me courage. Yet sometimes I talked of you to the little maid. Yes, I found her and made her come to me. I have brought her with me to England. The Duchess said —"

Her hands were in mine, but she held back from me.

"They would not have me in Dravstadt; Austria was in trouble because of me; so —"

"Suzanne! My Princess Suzanne!"

"A Princess without a kingdom."

"I have no kingdom to give you," I whispered, "only love. All unworthy though I be, I dare to love you. Without you, the world must for ever be empty. Oh, my dear, since last we stood together I have lived through the hardest days of my life. I have thought of

you every hour, and now — now you are here — here in my home. Suzanne, stay with me always — always — be my wife."

She still held back from me.

"Once you said there was no power could make you marry the Princess Suzanne."

"I did not know, then."

"There is another name you have often called me."

"My lady — my lady in gray."

"I like that best," she whispered. "I thought of it when I dressed to-day. Was I wrong to come?"

She was in my arms; my kisses were upon her lips.

"Tell me I was not wrong to come because I have found the kingdom of my desire."

"My lady," I whispered.

Love when it is greatest is most silent. We were silent for a long time; and so the Duchess found us.

THE END

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